HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE Rt Hon. DAVID CAMERON, MP, MAY 2015)

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§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt Hon. Caroline Spelman, MP
House of Commons  

Monday 22 February 2016

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Draft Investigatory Powers Bill

1. Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What assessment her Department has made of the cost implications for private businesses of compliance with the proposed requirements of the draft Investigatory Powers Bill. [903659]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The draft Investigatory Powers Bill has been drafted in close consultation with industry, and the estimated cost to the public purse of implementing its provisions will continue to be refined as we hold more detailed discussions with industry on implementation. It would not be appropriate to expect telecommunications companies to meet the costs themselves and, as now, full cost recovery will apply to operational costs, including those associated with new obligations under the Bill.

Philip Boswell: The Select Committee on Science and Technology warned that the Bill risks undermining our strongly performing tech sector because of uncertainty about the costs of complying with the new legislation. Will the Secretary of State assure us that UK businesses will not be placed at a commercial disadvantage compared with overseas competitors?

Mrs May: I can assure the hon. Gentleman of that and, as I said in my answer to his initial question, we will ensure that full cost recovery applies to operational costs for any companies that have, for example, notices issued to them. It is clear that that is what we have done as a Government in the past and what previous Governments have done, and we will continue to do it.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary look carefully at the recommendations from the Joint Committee on the draft Investigatory Powers Bill on the definition of internet connection records? We were very clear that greater clarity is needed on the definition to allow the private sector fully to cost its proposals.

Mrs May: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and the other Members of this House and of the other place who sat on the Committee and did an excellent job of producing a well-thought-through and careful report. We will of course carefully consider the issue of definition. We are looking at all three of the reports from the Science and Technology Committee, the Intelligence and Security Committee and the Joint Committee and we will make revised Bill proposals in due course.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): On the specific issue of private businesses, will the Home Secretary outline what recent discussions she and her Ministers have had on that subject with the devolved Administrations?

Mrs May: Discussions with the devolved Administrations have gone on throughout the preparation of the draft Bill. They have continued and will continue, as will discussions between Ministers and officials with companies and private businesses.
Family Visas

2. Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): If she will make it her policy to reduce the financial threshold for family visas. [903660]

10. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If she will make it her policy to reduce the financial threshold for family visas. [903669]

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): The minimum income threshold of £18,600 for sponsoring a partner under the family immigration rules ensures that couples wishing to establish their family life in the UK do not place burdens on the taxpayer and helps promote integration. It has been considered by the courts and upheld by the Court of Appeal.

Margaret Ferrier: The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants has said that these rules discriminate in the amount of money women earn compared with men. The rules also disadvantage young people. What action will the Home Secretary take to reduce these unfair rules?

James Brokenshire: The threshold was set as a consequence of advice from the Migration Advisory Committee, which carefully considered the level of income in terms of it not being a burden on the taxpayer. The gross median earnings of all employees in Scotland in 2014 were £21,725—higher than that threshold. Issues of legal challenge have obviously been raised by the courts. These were considered carefully and the threshold was upheld.

Martyn Day: The Secretary of State will have seen Amira’s story, reported by the BBC this morning. She fled Syria and gave birth to her son in the UK, but under the Government’s family visa rules, her husband, a Syrian national, is unable to join them here simply because they cannot afford the visa fees. Will the Secretary of State tell us where this British national should go to enjoy her family life? Her husband’s home country of Syria?

James Brokenshire: Various different routes could be available. We have the family reunion route, which might apply in these circumstances. Obviously, I am not familiar with all the issues he highlights but, equally, the Government are under certain duties regarding the protection of the welfare of children. This was considered by the court and upheld.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Although I take the point made so eloquently by my right hon. Friend about the burden on the taxpayer, to what extent do we take into account charges made by other countries to British nationals hoping to emigrate to them?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes the point about different immigration systems in different parts of the world. We have taken considered advice from the Migration Advisory Committee, looking at costs and at those burdens to see that someone does not place a burden on the UK taxpayer. Obviously, it is for other countries to assess what is appropriate in their own systems.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The financial threshold for family visas is causing particular distress to one of my constituents, who cannot work the hours required because she is a carer for her vulnerable child. This means my constituent is living without her husband and the child is living without his father. Does the Minister acknowledge that he is at risk of creating a generation of children whose only contact with one of their parents will be via Skype?

James Brokenshire: No, I do not accept that, and these issues of the welfare of the child are absolutely part of our consideration. This matter was considered by the Court of Appeal and our approach was firmly upheld. When the threshold was set in November 2011, the MAC gave the lower threshold of £18,600 but also advised that the threshold could have been set as high as £25,700. The Government reflected and set the current level, which has been upheld by the courts.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister mentions the Court of Appeal, but of course the matter is not entirely settled by that case. Next week the Supreme Court will hear the cases of two British nationals who cannot meet the tough financial rules that would allow their non-European Union spouses to come to live with them. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) mentioned Skype. According to the Children’s Commissioner for England, 15,000 British children are growing up in Skype families, where the only contact they have with one parent is via Skype. How can the Minister justify the stress and anxiety caused to these children by the inflexible and unjust rules?

James Brokenshire: I do not accept the characterisation that the hon. and learned Lady presents—indeed, I do not recognise the number she proffers. This is about ensuring good integration, which is part of the overall requirement in relation to language. This is about not only not imposing a burden on the taxpayer but about promoting integration, and we believe the policy is effective in doing that.

Joanna Cherry: Last year, the Conservative think-tank, Bright Blue, called on the Government to change these rules, noting “the significant contribution millions of low paid Britons make to our economy and society, as well as the value of having families living together in the same country.” If the Minister will not listen to the Opposition, will he at least listen to a think-tank from his own party and get rid of these rules, which discriminate against hard-working families?

James Brokenshire: I say again that we do not believe the rules are discriminatory in the way the hon. and learned Lady suggests. The system is in place to ensure good integration. It ensures that people are not a burden on the taxpayer, and I would have thought she recognised that as being a positive aspect of the policy. If people come here, contribute and settle, we welcome that, but the rules have been set in the way they have, this has been upheld by the courts and we will continue to underline those key themes.
Port Security

3. Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): What resources her Department provides for security measures at UK ports.

16. Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What resources her Department provides for security measures at UK ports.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Border Force carries out 100% checks of all arriving passengers on scheduled services. It works closely with other law enforcement organisations to deliver effective and intelligence-led responses to a range of security threats. Officers use high-tech equipment and an array of search techniques to combat immigration crime, and detect banned and restricted goods.

Anna Turley: I thank the Home Secretary for that answer. Last September, seven men and five children were found in a container in Teesport in my constituency, just three weeks after 20 illegal immigrants were found in South Shields. My local Border Force is facing cuts of about a quarter of its front-line staff, so how can she reassure me that these cuts are not damaging the safety and security of ports outside London and the south-east?

Mrs May: I can reassure the hon. Lady about that, because the approach we are taking comes across in a number of ways. We are looking not only to introduce new technology in Border Force but to ensure that it can operate flexibly and base its activities much more on an intelligence-led approach, so that we can target where the staff need to be. This Government have also enhanced our ability to deal with organised immigration crime through the creation of the organised immigration crime taskforce. The National Crime Agency, set up by the last coalition Government, is also taking this issue seriously and is acting on it.

Mike Kane: There are 10 electronic passport gates at Manchester airport in my constituency. The Department is unable to tell me how many people travel through them, how many rejections there have been and how often they malfunction. Does the Home Secretary agree that that is one of the gaps identified by the National Audit Office, which should be looked into?

Mrs May: Increasing the number of e-gates for checking passports was a very good move by this Government, especially as it provides enhanced security at our border. Steps are also taken to intercept those who do not have the correct documents before they travel so that they do not actually reach the border in the first place.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I congratulate the Home Secretary on her wise words about the value of EU membership in protecting the safety and security of this country? Even though that is the case—and I agree with her—may we have more specific focus on the quieter ports and airports that are used by smuggling gangs?

Mrs May: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), Border Force takes a more intelligence-led approach to such issues, which means it can be flexible in deploying staff at different ports. That is precisely because it recognises that we need not only to focus on one or two ports, but to have that flexibility across a range of ports.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): One of the most powerful arguments for the UK remaining in the EU is that we need and rely on a strong EU co-ordinated approach to security, including at our borders and our ports. As the Secretary of State and I know well, we rely on the Schengen Information System II to ensure that we are aware of the fraud alert levels. Will the Secretary of State confirm today that, far from reducing those levels of concern, Border Force will in fact face even more cuts, year on year, for the foreseeable future?

Mrs May: What I am happy to say to the hon. and learned Gentleman is that anyone who comes to the UK border will be stringently checked. We are doing that on a much more intelligence-led basis in looking at individuals who might be of concern. Yes, he is right: we have interactions with other member states in the European Union through the use of things such as the Schengen Information System II to ensure that we are able to identify people of concern who are coming...
across the border. Border Force’s other operations are not about people but about restricted and illegal goods being brought into the UK. The intelligence-led approach can be particularly helpful in identifying areas of concern and whether action is being taken appropriately.

Police and Crime Commissioners

4. William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners in reducing the level of crime. [903662]

13. Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of police and crime commissioners in reducing the level of crime. [903672]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Elected police and crime commissioners are providing accountable visible leadership and making a real difference to policing locally. Overall, PCCs have presided over a reduction in crime of more than a quarter since their introduction, according to the independent Crime Survey for England and Wales.

William Wragg: I thank my right hon. Friend for her reply. What assessment has her Department made of the possibility of conflicts of interest arising if police and crime commissioners hold high office in local government, including that of mayor, and what steps have been taken to safeguard against that?

Mrs May: A good scrutiny process is available through police and crime panels to look at potential conflicts of interest. That process is enshrined in law and is undertaken. It is important that when any area looks at the potential for amalgamating roles, such as the amalgamation in the Greater Manchester area of the role of police and crime commissioner with, it is predicted, that of mayor, it is important that there is full discussion and consideration of all aspects to ensure that, whatever role the individual or individuals play, they can continue to do so properly without conflict of interest, and ensure that the best service is delivered.

Alberto Costa: My local Leicestershire police force recently received a positive inspection report from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary. Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the work of the Leicestershire chief constable, Simon Cole, and the Conservative police and crime commissioner, Sir Clive Loader, in their efforts to fight crime, specifically the chief constable’s national work on the Prevent programme?

Mrs May: I am happy to extend congratulations, as I am sure everyone in the House is, on the excellent work of the police in Leicestershire, under both the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner, Sir Clive Loader, who has done an excellent job but is sadly stepping down at the forthcoming election. I would like to thank him for the work he has done in his first term as police and crime commissioner.

19. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The main problem that the South Yorkshire police and crime commissioner faces is the shortfall in his budget, which will lead to 250 police jobs being lost in 2016-17 as a result of police cuts, but it is made worse by the lack of certainty about future budgets, which makes rational planning difficult. Does the Home Secretary agree that PCCs could do their job better if their budget was set for the remainder of this Parliament, and what will she do about it?

Mrs May: The picture that the hon. Gentleman has set out of the South Yorkshire force is not one that I recognise. We have protected, if we take the police precept into account, police budgets across the period of the comprehensive spending review. I should have thought that he welcomed that, given that his Front-Bench team proposed that police budgets could be cut by 10%.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): One type of crime that has not reduced is violence and abuse against retail staff. In fact, a recent report by the British Retail Consortium found that those crimes had gone up by 25%. Any level of violence against retail staff is unacceptable, but what steps will the Home Secretary take to enable police and crime commissioners to act to reduce that?

Mrs May: We are all concerned when we see violent acts of any sort, but for those retail staff who are subject to them that is a matter of serious concern. The operational response to those crimes and to the potential for such crime is for chief constables to look into. As I have seen in my own constituency, a number of retail chains have worked closely with local police to try to ensure that they provide extra support and security for their staff.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Although I have had my differences at times with Alan Hardwick, the Lincolnshire police and crime commissioner, does my right hon. Friend agree that his record, along with that of Lincolnshire police, in reducing crime is exemplary, and is an example to all?

Mrs May: Again, I extend congratulations and welcome the work of the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner in reducing crime in Lincolnshire. It is not the only area where crime has fallen, but the fall in Lincolnshire is particularly significant.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Given the Home Secretary’s reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), has she seen the statement from the Northamptonshire police and crime commissioner to his police and crime panel on 2 February in which he says of the new funding formula:

“It is expected that this will transfer funding from the urban areas to more rural areas and Northamptonshire may benefit”?

Does that reflect Government policy, or is he just letting the cat out of the bag?

Mrs May: As I would have thought the hon. Gentleman would be aware, we have clearly said that the funding formula changes that we were proposing before Christmas are not going ahead. We are pausing that process and looking again at how we can develop a funding formula that reflects needs. If the hon. Gentleman looks at police forces across England and Wales, he will see that everybody—including the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, who is sitting next to him—has been very clear that the funding formula needs to change.
Emergency Services (Duty to Collaborate)

5. Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the potential merits of the proposed duty on emergency services to collaborate.

9. Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the potential merits of the proposed duty on emergency services to collaborate.

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): There are examples across the country of excellent collaboration between the emergency services, particularly the H3 project in Hampshire, where collaboration between the emergency services has driven efficiencies and a better service for the public. Police and crime commissioners will have a duty to collaborate when the Policing and Crime Bill currently before the House becomes law.

Mr Mak: Hampshire fire service and Hampshire police service share a joint headquarters building, resulting in financial efficiencies and a more joined-up service for my constituents. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating both Hampshire emergency services on taking the lead in collaborative working?

Mike Penning: I had the honour and privilege of being in Hampshire recently and saw for myself the brilliant work being done between the emergency services. That is a result of the collaboration between the chief fire officer and the chief constable, as well as the police and crime commissioner doing excellent work to see that we have the right sort of emergency service for the 21st century.

Damian Green: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that the new generation of police and crime commissioners who will be elected in a couple of months get behind this very important reform? Will he join me in welcoming the commitment of the excellent Conservative PCC candidate in Kent, Matthew Scott, and his strong desire to implement these vital reforms?

Mike Penning: I have seen what Matthew Scott is proposing to do when, as we on the Conservative Benches all hope, he becomes the police and crime commissioner. We need to ensure that we spend taxpayers’ money efficiently and well, and collaboration is the best way forward for that.

Mr Speaker: I call Kate Hoey.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Me?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady looks so surprised. She is rarely a shy or retiring soul. If she is, she must overcome her shyness.

Kate Hoey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Minister is well aware that the fire and rescue services collaborate well all over the country, particularly with the ambulance trusts. Why does he consider it necessary for police and crime commissioners to take control of the fire services under the Bill? Surely the two organisations are so different in so many ways that collaboration is possible without the PCC running our fire services.

Mike Penning: The truth of the matter is that someone duly elected to run the service, as the PCC would be, is better than anybody seconded on to any committee. I am sure we all want efficient emergency services, and the fire service working closely with the ambulance service and the police is the way we would like to do that.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Critical to collaboration between emergency services will be their communications networks. How much will the new emergency service communications network cost, and when will it be in place?

Mike Penning: We are currently going out to contract. There are bids out there, which are confidential. We know that the excellent Airwave system that we have had for many years needs replacing. It was very expensive and the replacement will be cheaper than Airwave.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): Shortly the police and crime commissioners will be able to put forward a business case to take over the governance of fire and rescue services. My hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr Mak) pointed out what Hampshire already does. At present we have a commercial trading arm which completely pays for the governance of the fire and rescue authority. What business case can a police and crime commissioner put forward that would allow him to run that service?

Mike Penning: The local community may want a more efficient service, which could be the case in Hampshire. I accept that Hampshire is particularly good, but that is not the case all over the country. Even when I was in Hampshire, there were people asking me for more collaboration and more work to be done together, and that request came particularly from the front-line operatives, who are probably the most important people in all this.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Given the funding cuts to the police service and the fire and rescue services already budgeted for by this Government, can the Minister guarantee that placing fire and rescue services under PCC control will not lead to further cuts in the number of front-line firefighters?

Mike Penning: Thank goodness the Chancellor did not listen to Labour Front-Benchers when we looked at police funding to 2020, because they wanted a 10% cut, and there will be no cut. We must make sure that we have an efficient service—the sort of efficient service I would have liked to have had when I was in the fire service—and that will be going forward.

Knife Crime

6. Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): What assessment she has made of trends in the level of knife crime.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): Tackling knife crime is a priority for the Government. Latest police recorded
crime figures show that knife crime is 14% lower than it was in June 2010. However, we recognise that there is more to do, and new actions to tackle knife crime will be set out in the forthcoming modern crime prevention strategy.

Will Quince: In Essex, the number of serious offences involving a knife rose 21% in the last recorded year. What action is my hon. Friend’s Department taking to tackle knife crime and address the gang violence that fuels it in so many cases?

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I also congratulate him on the arrival of new baby Quince, in whose delivery I believe he was very involved. I am very aware of the concerns about knife crime in Essex, and I recently had a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns)—I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss precisely this issue. We are taking a range of steps, and earlier this month we supported 13 police forces, including Essex, that undertook co-ordinated action against knife crime.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Knife crime, like much other crime, is best dealt with pre-emptively and at the community and neighbourhood level. In Sussex, crime has gone up 8%, but Government inspectors said today that front-line and neighbourhood level. In Sussex, crime has gone up 8%, but Government inspectors said today that front-line and neighbourhood policing is “routinely” being taken away. Will the Minister please look again at the issue of the 1,000 police officers and staff who are being taken away. Will the Minister consider an amnesty? Amnesties have been implemented in the past to invite people to hand in their knives or other weapons, and that was very successful in the west midlands some years ago.

Karen Bradley: That is a matter for chief constables to determine. However, as I said, we have worked with 13 forces, and included in that work were knife amnesties.

Fraud and Cybercrime

7. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What recent discussions the Government have had with banks and industry bodies on steps to reduce fraud and cybercrime.

Karen Bradley: That is a matter for chief constables to determine. However, as I said, we have worked with 13 forces, and included in that work were knife amnesties.

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): Discussions with banks and industry bodies have led to the recently announced Joint Fraud Taskforce. This is the first time that banks, police and Government have joined together to ensure that the public are aware of, and protected from, fraud. The taskforce’s mission is to counter the wicked work of fraudsters.

Sir David Amess: While I absolutely understand the difficulties in effectively policing the internet, financial scams—judging by my own parliamentary account—seem to be completely out of control, and the most vulnerable people are being targeted. Will my right hon. Friend therefore have another look at this issue to see whether there is some way we can bring these criminals to account?

Mr Hayes: Because we have taken a fresh look at this, as my hon. Friend recommends, we have launched the joint taskforce; we are continuing to support the Cyber Streetwise campaign, which makes people more aware of, and therefore more guarded about, fraud; and we invested £90 million on cyber-security in the previous Parliament and will invest £1.9 billion over the next five years. We take this seriously, not least, Mr Speaker, because, as you know, in the cyber-age I am a cyber-Minister—up to the minute, up to the mark and up to the job.

Mr Speaker: We would expect no less of the right hon. Gentleman.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Since the cyber-Minister is up to the mark, may I ask him about the activities of a website called Bestvalid, which was discovered recently selling the stolen bank details of 100,000 British citizens? Can he explain, as an up-to-the-minute cyber-Minister, how it was possible for this website to carry on for six months before being closed down, and how much of the £1.9 billion that he is targeting on cybercrime will be used proactively to close down sites of this kind?

Mr Hayes: The right hon. Gentleman knows, because his Select Committee has drawn attention to this in the past, that it is critically important that the Government work with all other agencies, including banks and private sector organisations, and the taskforce will be missioned to do that. It may be worth saying that this is summed up by the fact that the National Police Chiefs Council has publicly signed up to “commit our full support to the objectives and actions of the…Taskforce” to “work in partnership to…protect the public from becoming victims of fraud and fraud scams, maximising opportunities to stop fraudsters from operating”, in exactly the way he recommends.
Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The cyber-Minister will know that people are more likely to be mugged online than in the street, with serious consequences for victims. After five years of the Government saying, “We cut police but we have cut crime”, will he confirm that, when 6 million cybercrimes are included in the statistics, the truth will be told that far from falling, crime is changing, and that our country now faces crime doubling just as this Government continue to cut the number of police officers?

Mr Hayes: The hon. Gentleman will be disappointed that I am going to say that he is right to draw attention to the scale of this problem. I remind him that we were the Government who made the decision to publish these statistics and to designate cybercrime in the way that we have, because until we appreciate the scale of the problem, we will not develop the solutions necessary to deal with it. As he will know, we are using some of the extra resource to set up the national cyber centre to co-ordinate work in this area.

Police and Crime Commissioners

8. Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): What steps is she taking to encourage police and crime commissioners to support early intervention programmes; and if she will make a statement.

Karen Bradley: The evidence-gathering stage of the review has begun. The Government are committed to support early intervention, and if she will make a statement.

Mr Allen: The American comedian Eddie Cantor said, “If those currently on the most-wanted list had been the most wanted as children they would no longer be on the most-wanted list.” In that context, will the Minister welcome the work that his Department is doing with the Early Intervention Foundation in creating police leaders’ academies on early intervention, and will he ensure that funding is available so that every police and crime commissioner elected this year can attend such courses, as this is the best crime prevention measure we know?

Mike Penning: I praise the work of the Early Intervention Foundation; the work it does is very important. Other agencies also do really important work. We all know that if we can catch them young we can prevent people from turning into the types of criminals that sadly this society sees too often in our prisons.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Following the Government’s troubled families programme, there can be no doubt that early intervention works—it reduces petty crime, encourages school attendance, and gets people into jobs. However, it has become clear—this is why we have put the money into the foundation and why we are doing a review of the early intervention academy for police leaders, so that we can have proof of the outcomes and let the money follow good resources.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Humberside police has 500 fewer officers than five years ago, across north-east Lincolnshire we have had a 38% rise in violent crime, and sexual offences are up 18%. Is it not the reality that early intervention is not a priority for the police on the ground and that it is being pushed on to ill-resourced local authorities?

Mike Penning: I am sure that the Whips Office wrote the hon. Lady’s question, because every single time we hear from the Labour party, it wants more money, and yet its Front Benchers want to cut funding to the police force—[Interruption.] That is the reality.

Mike Penning: I am sure that every chief constable, police and crime commissioner and PCC candidate has heard exactly what my right hon. Friend has said. That is why we have put the money into the foundation and why we are doing a review of the early intervention academy for police leaders, so that we can have proof of the outcomes and let the money follow good resources.

Mike Penning: I am sure that the Whips Office wrote the hon. Lady’s question, because every single time we hear from the Labour party, it wants more money, and yet its Front Benchers want to cut funding to the police force—[Interruption.] That is the reality.

TrackMyCrime Service

11. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What the take-up of the TrackMyCrime service among police forces has been up to date.

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): The Government have supported the first police early innovation leadership academy and provided grant funding for the Early Intervention Foundation. This is really interesting work being done to protect young children. Naturally we will help and encourage chief constables and PCCs up and down the country to help to reduce crime, support victims, and closely engage with their partner agencies, such as the foundation.

Mr Penning: I am sure that the Whips Office wrote the hon. Lady’s question, because every single time we hear from the Labour party, it wants more money, and yet its Front Benchers want to cut funding to the police force—[Interruption.] That is the reality.

Mike Penning: I wrote my previous answer earlier, because I did not know what was going to be asked. The truth is that if all victims know exactly what is going on once they have reported a crime, they will have confidence in the criminal justice system. TrackMyCrime will help in that regard.

Psychoactive Substances Act

12. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on reviewing the status of poppers within the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): The evidence-gathering stage of the review has begun. The Government are considering the next steps to ensure that the health and relationship benefits of poppers, and their risks, are fully assessed in an open and transparent manner.

Jeff Smith: Eighteen thousand police officers have been cut in the past five years. Is it really sensible to waste scarce police resources on enforcing a ban on poppers and unnecessarily criminalising users of a relatively harmless substance, particularly when the ban may be revoked in a few months?
Karen Bradley: I hope that the hon. Gentleman welcomed the Psychoactive Substances Act, because we do not know what effect such substances have on young people—they may cause death—so the blanket ban on them is incredibly important. We are committed to reviewing the benefits of poppers against the harms, to see whether they should be included.

Modern Slavery Act


Mrs May: The Modern Slavery Act received Royal Assent on 26 March 2015. It is too early to make a full assessment of the effectiveness of the Act, but I am pleased that key provisions are already having an impact. The ports have already been using the slavery and trafficking prevention orders to stop offences occurring, and some businesses have already published statements setting out what steps they have taken to prevent modern slavery in their global supply chains.

Jeremy Lefroy: In the “Strategic Plan 2015-2017”, the independent anti-slavery commissioner writes: “The role that the private sector can play in the fight against slavery should not be underestimated.” What assessment has the Home Secretary made of the effectiveness of the Act’s transparency and supply chain provisions for companies with turnovers of £36 million or more?

Mrs May: First, the independent anti-slavery commissioner is absolutely right, because this is not just about law enforcement and Government taking action in this area; it is also about working with the private sector and businesses. I am pleased that, although the first set of declarations in relation to supply chains will be compulsory from 31 March, a number of companies have already made those declarations. In a month or so, I will hold an event with companies to share good practice among them so that we can ensure that we are getting the best information out there, and then consumers can make their decisions.

Andrew Gwyne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Despite some of the good measures in the Act, child trafficking is still taking place across the European Union, hidden within the scandal that is the migration crisis, which is engulfing the entire continent. What work is the Home Secretary doing with her colleagues across the European Union to make sure that the issue is adequately tackled across all 28 member states?

Mrs May: I am encouraging other member states to take the step that we took with the Modern Slavery Act and introduce new legislation. We and other member states are working on organised immigration crime and human trafficking. We have put resources into that and are working with a number of countries to identify the traffickers and to ensure that proper action is taken. The independent anti-slavery commissioner has made his expertise available to a number of countries across the European Union. That is of enormous benefit, because he is expert in this area.

23. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), will my right hon. Friend set out in more detail the importance of the transparency in supply chains provision in the Modern Slavery Act, and how it will be monitored?

Mr Speaker: Yes, but not too much detail, given the time.

Mrs May: The measure has two important impacts. First, it makes companies think about whether there is slavery in their supply chains. Secondly, their declarations of the action they have taken—or of the fact that they have taken no action—will be available to consumers, who will be able to make choices about which companies to do business with as a result. We are looking at a number of options for ensuring that that information is publicly available in one place.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): May I make the right hon. Lady aware of the excellent work of the Palm Cove Society in Headingley, in my constituency? I was shocked to hear about the extent of modern slavery in this country. Does she think that people are sufficiently aware of that, and what more can she do to highlight it?

Mrs May: We are aware of the work that the Palm Cove Society does. The hon. Gentleman is right; I think that most people are shocked to know that slavery takes place in this country, and they would be even more shocked to see the degree and extent of it. It is up to everybody in this House, not just the Government, to make people aware of that and aware of the action that they can take to stop it.

Daesh Propaganda

15. Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): What assessment the Government has made of the effectiveness of steps to tackle Daesh propaganda.

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes): The Government has made of the effectiveness of steps to tackle Daesh propaganda.

The UK Government’s “UK Against Daesh” Twitter channel highlights the hypocrisies, hyperbole and wicked calumnies of Daesh. We work with the community organisations that I described a moment ago, and 130 community-based projects were delivered in 2015, reaching 25,000 people. More than half those projects were delivered in schools and aimed at the young people whom we need to safeguard.
Mr Speaker: I am glad that even on this most solemn of matters, the right hon. Gentleman has been able, as always, to provide us with a poetical flourish.

Topical Questions

T1. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Last week, I was in Washington at the five-country ministerial with my counterparts from the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to discuss the threat we all face from extremism and terrorism—a threat that is real and growing. In 2014, Daesh in Syria and Iraq directed, inspired or enabled some 20 attacks in other countries worldwide. In 2015, there were almost 60 such attacks, as well as more than 200 attacks carried out by Daesh branches including those in Libya and Egypt.

This is a fight that cannot be won by acting in isolation. It is a global threat, which requires a global response. We must be more open to sharing intelligence with our partners and more proactive in offering our expertise. We must work at an international level to counter the twisted narrative peddled by Daesh and other terrorist organisations, and we must organise our own efforts more effectively to support vulnerable states and improve their ability to respond to the threat from terrorism. At the five-country ministerial, we made commitments to strengthen information sharing, enhance efforts to prevent the movement of terrorists and encourage social media companies to work more with Governments. This is the challenge of our generation, and it is one that we will win by working together.

Chris Green: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. Does she agree that the creation of the police and crime commissioner role was a great step in the right direction, and that it ought to change radically in future and take on more responsibilities?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It was important to create the role of a directly elected individual who is accountable to the public for local policing, but we called such individuals police and other terrorist organisations, and we must organise our own efforts more effectively to support vulnerable states and improve their ability to respond to the threat from terrorism. At the five-country ministerial, we made commitments to strengthen information sharing, enhance efforts to prevent the movement of terrorists and encourage social media companies to work more with Governments. This is the challenge of our generation, and it is one that we will win by working together.

Andy Burnham: I think I will take that as a yes. Yesterday, on the “The Andrew Marr Show”, the Prime Minister was explicitly clear that our membership of the EU helps Britain fight terrorism, but within minutes he was directly contradicted by one of his own Cabinet Ministers, who claimed the UK’s EU membership made a Paris-style attack here more likely. This would be bad coming from UKIP; but coming from one of our most senior members of the Cabinet, it is downright irresponsible. Will the Home Secretary take this opportunity to reaffirm Government policy on this crucial issue and condemn this baseless scaremongering?

Mrs May: The Government’s position on this issue is very clear. As I have just indicated in answer to the first question the right hon. Gentleman asked me, I am very clear that there are many areas in which co-operation with other member states in the European Union is to our benefit in terms of the national security of this country and dealing with criminal matters. As I indicated in response to earlier questions, we do of course take security at our border very seriously, and that is why we have the checks we do at our border.

T2. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I have met a number of police officers in my constituency who have witnessed extreme trauma while on duty and have been diagnosed as suffering from mental illness or should opt back in to 35 measures in relation to protocol 36—justice and home affairs measures—precisely because we believed that they were in the national interest.

Andy Burnham: I think I will take that as a yes. Yesterday, on the “The Andrew Marr Show”, the Prime Minister was explicitly clear that our membership of the EU helps Britain fight terrorism, but within minutes he was directly contradicted by one of his own Cabinet Ministers, who claimed the UK’s EU membership made a Paris-style attack here more likely. This would be bad coming from UKIP; but coming from one of our most senior members of the Cabinet, it is downright irresponsible. Will the Home Secretary take this opportunity to reaffirm Government policy on this crucial issue and condemn this baseless scaremongering?

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T3. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Government have agreed to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to create a new initiative to help resettle unaccompanied children from conflict regions. Will the Minister confirm when the initiative will begin and say which organisations the Government will work with to help identify those children?

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): Yes, we are working with the UNHCR on the development of a new initiative to settle unaccompanied children from conflict regions outside the EU. Discussions are ongoing with the UNHCR—we have had a roundtable meeting already with a number of non-governmental organisations—and we will obviously come back to the House shortly, when our consideration has concluded.

T4. James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I have met a number of police officers in my constituency who have witnessed extreme trauma while on duty and have been diagnosed as suffering from mental illness or
injury as a result. Yet the arrangements for their sick pay and their medical discharge and pension seem to be strikingly different from that of those who have suffered physical injury in the course of their duties. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the Government’s pursuit of parity of esteem between mental illness and physical illness, police forces should ensure that all injuries or illnesses attributable to service are supported in the same way?

Mrs May: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Police officers are entitled to exactly the same sick leave and pay arrangements whether they suffer a mental or physical illness. Any requests for ill-health retirement are, similarly, subject to exactly the same test. It is the responsibility of chief constables to provide for that in their local policies. I am pleased to say that in October 2014 the Government allocated £8 million to the blue light programme to support the mental and physical wellbeing of emergency services personnel.

T5. [903688] Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have always justified their cuts to policing on the basis that crime has not gone up. Since 2010, Greater Manchester police force has lost 1,664 officers, which is more than any other force. Recorded crime in Greater Manchester is now going up, and it is doing so faster than in any other metropolitan area. If crime continues to rise, will the Government reconsider their reductions in the number of front-line police officers, as would be reasonable?

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): Let us go over this again. The Government have not reduced the number of police officers on the frontline. Actually, the percentage on the frontline has gone up. The one party that wanted to cut the police budget at the last election was the Labour party—a group of people we did not listen to.

T7. [903691] Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that police services continue reforms better to protect the public?

Mrs May: We are taking a number of steps. A piece of work is being undertaken to look at where capabilities would best lie in terms of police reform. I addressed a conference of chief constables and police and crime commissioners earlier this year about this matter. I am happy to say that I have had discussions on precisely this matter with my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). If he becomes Mayor of London, I am assured that he will continue the reforms in the Metropolitan police.

T6. [903689] Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): The Europol chief, Rob Wainwright, has warned that up to 5,000 ISIS fighters are already in the EU. How does the Home Secretary feel that being in the EU makes us safer?

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that what is important for the United Kingdom in this respect is that we can be in the European Union and continue with the border controls that we have, unlike the countries that are in Schengen. We will never be in Schengen. We will maintain security checks at the border, which is the right thing for us to do.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): The Prime Minister has claimed that he has delivered on his promise that “if an EU jobseeker has not found work within 6 months, they will be required to leave”—a promise that he made to JCB workers on 28 November 2014. However, in reply to my written question, number 17574, in December last year, the Immigration Minister admitted that EU migrants can “keep the status of jobseeker for longer than six months”. Will the Home Secretary clarify who is right—the Prime Minister or the Immigration Minister?

James Brokenshire: I think we can safely say that the Prime Minister is right. In a few moments, my hon. Friend will hear precisely how the Prime Minister has set out the agenda in relation to welfare benefits.

T9. [903693] Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I was proud to join Housing for Women last week to celebrate the first anniversary of its operating the women’s refuge in Merton. It supported 38 women and 45 children in 2015. Unfortunately, not all refuges are in the same position, with 30 closing over the last year and 42% of rape crisis centres not having money beyond next month. Will the Home Secretary do everything she can to ensure that no woman is forced to return home to a violent partner and, possibly, to her death?

Mrs May: I remember the days when the hon. Lady and I served on the council of the London Borough of Merton. She took an interest in domestic violence and support for its victims and survivors then, and she continues to do so now. Of course, the Government have put extra money into refuges and supported various domestic violence services. It is a terrible crime and we need to deal with it.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What assessment has been made of the number of connections police forces have made to the child abuse image database since it launched?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): My hon. Friend raises the very important issue of the child abuse image database, which was introduced by the Government and is leading the world in tackling online indecent images of children. We now have all 43 forces connected to the image database and are starting to see real results in protecting children.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Where police and fire and rescue services decide to amalgamate regionally, will the Secretary of State give a guarantee that she will not in any way, shape or form allow the services they provide to be mutualised or privatised?

Mrs May: The reason for enabling police and crime commissioners to bring together policing and fire and rescue services is to be able to offer enhanced services. In looking at a decision to be taken at a local level, a business case will have to be made for bringing them together.
European Council

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the agreement reached in Brussels last week, but first let me say a word about the migration crisis, which was also discussed at the European Council. We agreed we needed to press ahead with strengthening the EU’s external borders to ensure that non-refugees are returned promptly, and to back the new mission to disrupt the criminal gangs working between Greece and Turkey, who are putting so many people’s lives at risk. I made it clear that Britain will continue to contribute, and will step up our contribution, in all these areas.

Turning to Britain’s place in Europe, I have spent the past nine months setting out the four areas where we need reform, and meeting all the other 27 EU Heads of State and Government to reach an agreement that delivers concrete reforms in all four areas. Let me take each in turn.

First, British jobs and British business depend on being able to trade with Europe on a level playing field, so we wanted: new protections for our economy; to safeguard the pound; to promote our industries, including our financial services industries; to protect British taxpayers from the costs of problems in the eurozone; and to ensure that we have a full say over the rules of the single market while remaining outside the eurozone. We got all those things. We have not just permanently protected the pound and our right to keep it, but ensured that we cannot be discriminated against. Responsibility for supervising the financial stability of the UK will always remain in the hands of the Bank of England. We have ensured that British taxpayers will never be made to bail out countries in the eurozone. We have made sure that the eurozone cannot act as a bloc to undermine the integrity of the free trade single market and we have guaranteed British business will never face any discrimination for being outside the eurozone. So, for example, our financial services firms—our No. 1 services export, employing over a million people—can never be forced to relocate inside the eurozone if they want to undertake complex trades in euros, just because they are based in the UK.

These protections are not just set out in a legally binding agreement. All 28 member states were also clear that the treaties would be changed to incorporate all those things. We have not just permanently protected the pound and our right to keep it, but ensured that we cannot be discriminated against. Responsibility for supervising the financial stability of the UK will always remain in the hands of the Bank of England. We have ensured that British taxpayers will never be made to bail out countries in the eurozone. We have made sure that the eurozone cannot act as a bloc to undermine the integrity of the free trade single market and we have guaranteed British business will never face any discrimination for being outside the eurozone. So, for example, our financial services firms—our No. 1 services export, employing over a million people—can never be forced to relocate inside the eurozone if they want to undertake complex trades in euros, just because they are based in the UK.

Thirdly, we wanted to reduce the very high level of migration from within the EU by preventing the abuse of the free movement and preventing our welfare system from acting as a magnet for people to come to our country. After the hard work of the Home Secretary, we have secured new powers against criminals from other countries, including powers to stop them coming here in the first place, and powers to deport them if they are already here. We agreed longer re-entry bans for fraudsters and people who collude in sham marriages, and an end to the frankly ridiculous situation where EU nationals can avoid British immigration rules when bringing their families from outside the EU.

This agreement broke new ground, with the European Council agreeing to reverse decisions from the European Court of Justice. We have also secured a breakthrough agreement for Britain to reduce the unnatural draw that our benefits system exerts across Europe. We have already made sure that EU migrants cannot claim the new agreement for Britain to reduce the unnatural draw that our benefits system exerts across Europe. We have already made sure that EU migrants cannot claim the new agreement for Britain to reduce the unnatural draw that our benefits system exerts across Europe. We have already made sure that EU migrants cannot claim the new agreement for Britain to reduce the unnatural draw that our benefits system exerts across Europe. We have already made sure that EU migrants cannot claim the new agreement for Britain to reduce the unnatural draw that our benefits system exerts across Europe.

We have secured commitments to complete trade and investment agreements with the fastest growing and most dynamic economies around the world, including the USA, Japan and China, as well as our Commonwealth allies India, New Zealand and Australia. These deals could add billions of pounds and thousands of jobs to our economy every year. And, of course, they build on the deals we already have with 53 countries around the world through which Britain has benefited from the negotiating muscle that comes from being part of the world’s largest trading bloc.

Country after country has said to me that of course they could sign trade deals with Britain, but they also said that their priority would be trade deals with the EU. By their nature, these EU deals would be bigger and better, and a deal with Britain would not even be possible until we had settled our position outside the EU. So, for those Members who care about signing new trade deals outside the EU, we would be looking at years and years of delay.

Last but by no means least, on competitiveness one of the biggest frustrations for British business is the red tape and bureaucracy, so we agreed there will now be targets to cut the total burden of EU regulation on business. This builds on the progress we have already made, with the Commission already cutting the number of new initiatives by 80%. It means that the cost of EU red tape will be going down, not up.

Of course, if we were to leave the EU but ultimately achieve a deal with full access to the single market, like Norway, we would still be subject to all of the EU’s regulation when selling into Europe—but with no say over the rules. As the former European spokesman for the Norwegian Conservative party said:

“If you want to run Europe, you must be in Europe. If you want to be run by Europe, feel free to join Norway in the European Economic Area.”

We also established a new emergency brake so that EU migrants will have to wait four years until they have full access to our benefits. People said it was impossible
to achieve real change in this area and that a four-year restriction on benefits was completely out of the question—yet that is what we have done. Once activated, the emergency brake will be in place for seven years. If it begins next year, it will still be operating in 2024 and there will be people who will not get full benefits until 2028. All along, we have said that people should not be able to come here and get access to our benefits system straight away—no more something for nothing, and that is what we have achieved.

I am sure that the discussion about welfare and immigration will be intense, but let me make this point. No country outside the EU has agreed full access to the single market without accepting paying into the EU and accepting free movement. In addition, our new safeguards lapse if we vote to leave the EU, so we might end up with free movement but without these new protections.

The fourth area in which we wanted to make significant changes was to protect our country from further European political integration and to increase powers for our national Parliament. Ever since we joined, Europe has been on the path to something called ever closer union. It means a political union. We have never liked it; we have never wanted it. Now Britain will be permanently and legally excluded from it. The text says that the treaties will be changed to make it clear that “the Treaty references to ever closer union do not apply to the United Kingdom.”

So as a result of this negotiation, Britain can never be part of a European superstate.

The Council also agreed that ever closer union, which has been referred to in previous judgments of the European Court of Justice, does not offer a legal basis for extending the scope of any provisions of the treaties or EU secondary legislation. People used to talk about a multi-speed Europe; now we have a clear agreement that different countries are not only travelling at different speeds but ultimately heading to different destinations. I would argue that is a fundamental change in the way this organisation works.

We have also strengthened the role of this House and all national Parliaments. We have already passed a referendum Act—the European Union Referendum Act 2015—to make sure that no powers can be handed to Brussels without the explicit consent of the British people in a referendum. Now, if Brussels comes up with legislation that we do not want, we can get together with other Parliaments and block it with a red card. We have a new mechanism finally to enforce the principle that, as far as possible, powers should sit here in Westminster, not in Brussels, so now, every year, the European Union must go through the powers that it exercises and work out which are no longer needed and should be returned to nation states.

In recent years, we have seen attempts to bypass our opt-out on justice and home affairs by bringing forward legislation under a different label. For example, attempts to interfere with the way the UK authorities handle fraud were made under the guise of EU budget legislation. The agreement at last week’s Council ensures that that can never happen again.

The reforms that we have secured will be legally binding in international law, and will be deposited as a treaty at the United Nations. They cannot be unpicked without the agreement of Britain and every other EU country. As I have said, all 28 member states were also clear that the treaties would be changed to incorporate the protections for the UK as an economy outside the eurozone, and our permanent exclusion from ever closer union.

Our special status means that Britain can have the best of both worlds. We will be in the parts of Europe that work for us, influencing the decisions that affect us, in the driving seat of the world’s biggest single market, and with the ability to take action to keep our people safe; but we will be out of the parts of Europe that do not work for us. We will be out of the euro, out of the eurozone bailouts, out of the passport-free, no-borders Schengen area, and permanently and legally protected from ever being part of an ever closer union.

Of course, there is still more to do. I am the first to say that there are still many ways in which this organisation needs to improve, and the task of reforming Europe does not end with last week’s agreement. However, with the special status that this settlement gives us, I do believe the time has come to fulfill another vital commitment that the Government made, and hold a referendum. Today I am commencing the process set out under our European Union Referendum Act to propose that the British people decide our future in Europe through an in/out referendum on Thursday 23 June. The Foreign Secretary has laid in both Houses a report setting out the new settlement that the Government have negotiated. That fulfils the duty to publish information which is set out in section 6 of the European Union Referendum Act. As the Cabinet agreed on Saturday, the Government’s position will be to recommend that Britain remain in a reformed European Union.

This is a vital decision for the future of our country, and I believe we should also be clear that it is a final decision. An idea has been put forward that if the country voted to leave, we could have a second renegotiation and perhaps another referendum. I will not dwell on the irony that some people who want to vote to leave apparently want to use a “leave” vote to remain, but such an approach also ignores more profound points about democracy, diplomacy and legality. This is a straight democratic decision—staying in or leaving—and no Government can ignore that. Having a second renegotiation followed by a second referendum is not on the ballot paper. For a Prime Minister to ignore the express will of the British people to leave the EU would be not just wrong, but undemocratic.

On the diplomacy, the idea that other European countries would be ready to start a second negotiation is for the birds. Many are under pressure for what they have already agreed. Then there is the legality. I want to spell out this point carefully, because it is important. If the British people vote to leave, there is only one way to bring that about, namely to trigger article 50 of the treaties and begin the process of exit, and the British people would rightly expect that to start straight away.

Let me be absolutely clear about how this works. It triggers a two-year time period to negotiate the arrangements for exit. At the end of this period, if no agreement is in place, then exit is automatic unless every one of the 27 other EU member states agrees to a delay.

And we should be clear that this process is not an invitation to re-join; it is a process for leaving. Sadly, I have known a number of couples who have begun
The people of Britain now face an historic choice on 23 June on whether to remain part of the European Union or to leave. We welcome the fact that it is now in the hands of the people of this country to decide that issue. The Labour party and the trade union movement are overwhelmingly for staying in because we believe that the European Union has brought investment, jobs and protection for workers, consumers and the environment, and we are convinced that a vote to remain is in the best interests of the people.

In the 21st century, as a country and as a continent—and, indeed, as a human race—we face some challenging issues: how to tackle climate change; how to address the power of global corporations; how to ensure that they pay fair taxes; how to tackle cybercrime and terrorism; how we trade fairly and protect jobs and pay in an era of globalisation; how we address the causes of the huge refugee movements across the world; and how we adapt to a world where people of all countries move more frequently to live, work and retire. All these issues are serious, pressing and self-evidently can be solved only by international co-operation.

The European Union will be a vital part of how we, as a country, meet those challenges, so it is therefore more than disappointing that the Prime Minister’s deal has failed to address a single one of those issues. Last week, like him, I was in Brussels meeting Heads of Government and leaders of European Socialist parties, one of whom said to me—[HON. MEMBERS: “Who are you?”] [Laughter.] No. What they said—[Interjection.] The Conservative party might care to think for a moment about what is going on. One person said to me, and I thought it was quite profound, “We are discussing the future of a continent and one English Tory has reduced it to the issue of taking away benefits”—from workers and children. The reality is that this entire negotiation has not been about the challenges facing our continent or about the issues facing the people of Britain. Indeed, it has been a theatrical sideshow about trying to appease—or failing to appease—half of the Prime Minister’s own Conservative party.

That is not to say that there have not been some worthwhile changes. The red card system to strengthen the hands of national Parliaments is something that we on the Labour Benches have long backed. Indeed, it was in the Labour manifesto for the last general election; it was not in the Conservative manifesto, but we welcome the symbolic amendment on ever-closer union. Britain’s long-standing decision not to join the euro or Schengen has been settled and accepted a long time ago. However, we see the influence of Tory party funders on the Prime Minister’s special status not for Britain but for City of London interests. It is the same incentive that caused his friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer to rush to Europe with an army of lawyers to oppose any regulation of the grotesque level of bankers’ bonuses. It is necessary to protect the rights of non-eurozone states, but not to undermine EU-wide efforts to regulate the financial sector, including the boardroom pocket stuffing in the City of London.

Labour stands for a different approach. That is why our Members of the European Parliament are opposing the dangerous elements of the very secretive Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, which threatened to undermine national sovereignty, push the privatisation
of public services, and drive down standards for workers, consumers, the environment and public health. Human rights ought to be part of that treaty. Indeed, I believe they should be a feature of all trade treaties.

Then there is the so-called emergency brake. We support the principle of fair contribution to social security, but, the evidence does not back up the claim that in-work benefits are a significant draw for workers who come to Britain from the European Union. The changes that the Prime Minister has secured do nothing to address the real challenges of low pay in Britain and the undercutting of local wage rates and industry-wide pay agreements. They will not put a penny in the pockets of workers in Britain, stop the grotesque exploitation of many migrant workers or reduce inward migration to Britain.

Will the Prime Minister tell us what discussions he had to get European rules in place to protect the going rate and to stop agencies bringing in cheap labour to undercut workers in Britain while exploiting the migrant force? Did he speak to other EU leaders about outlawing the so-called “Swedish derogation” from the agency workers directive, which threatens to undermine one of the key achievements of the last Labour Government by allowing unscrupulous employers to use temporary agency staff to undercut other workers? Those would have been positive and worthwhile discussions to tackle low pay, reduce in-work benefit costs and protect workers. We must, on all sides, be clear that Britain has benefited from migration—from EU workers coming to work in our industry and in our public services to fill gaps. For example, I think of the thousands of doctors and nurses who work in our NHS, saving lives every day they are at work.

The European Union has delivered protection for workers in Britain. It was Labour that made sure that Britain’s EU membership guarantees minimum paid leave; protection on working time; rights for agency workers; paid maternity and paternity leave; equal pay; anti-discrimination laws; and protection for the workforce when companies change ownership. It was Labour, working in partnership with sister parties and unions across Europe, that made sure the Prime Minister’s attempt to diminish workers’ rights was kept off the agenda for these EU negotiations. Labour has supported moves to reduce child benefit to non-resident children as a reasonable amendment, but we also welcome the protection for existing migrants until 2020, so that families have stability of income.

The Prime Minister’s deal includes elements we welcome and others that concern us, but it is largely irrelevant to the choice facing the British people; not one single element has a significant impact on the case we will be making to stay in. We welcome the fact that this theatrical sideshow is over, so that we can now get on with making the real case, which will be put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson), who will be leading our campaign. Labour believes the EU is a vital framework for European trade and co-operation in the 21st century. A vote to remain is in the interests of people, not only for what the EU delivers today, but as a framework through which we can achieve much more in the future. But to deliver these progressive reforms that I have referred to, we need to work with our partners in Europe, and therefore we must ensure that Britain remains a member. That is the case we are going to be making—it is for a Europe that is socially cohesive, and a Europe that shares the benefits of wealth and prosperity among all its citizens. That is the case we are making, as the Labour party, as the trade union movement in this country, and we look forward to that public debate.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution. He and I disagree on many, many things—economic policy, social policy, welfare policy and even the approach we should take within Europe, as he has just demonstrated in his response—but we do agree about one thing: Britain should be in there, fighting for a good deal for our country. I worry a little for him because he is going to be accused of all sorts of things, some of them fair, some of them unfair. I fear that if he takes this course, he will be accused of being a member of the establishment, and that would be the unfairlest attack of all.

On what the right hon. Gentleman said about the deal, I will make two points about why he should welcome it. The first is that, as far as I can see, it implements almost every pledge on Europe in the Labour manifesto—I am looking at the former Labour leader when I say that. Labour pledged to complete the single market. It pledged “tougher budget discipline”. It said “we will ensure EU rules protect the interests of non-Euro members.” That is absolutely right. The manifesto went on to say: “People coming to Britain from the EU to look for work are expected to contribute to our economy, and to our society. So we will secure reforms to immigration and social security rules”.

I therefore hope Labour will welcome the things in this agreement. [Interruption.] I am just reminding my new friends what they said at the election. They said this: “We will work to strengthen the influence national parliaments over European legislation, by arguing for a ‘red-card mechanism’ for member states”.

Excellent, that is another thing that has been achieved.

The right hon. Gentleman was unfair when he said that this deal was really all about Britain, and not about anyone else. The Slovakian Prime Minister said, good, “the myth about ever-closer union has fallen.”

The Hungarian Prime Minister said:

“The UK managed to put an end to the practice of ‘creeping power withdrawal’ from national member states.”

Romano Prodi, the former President of the Commission, said this:

“The real consequence of the summit is extraordinarily important: Brussels has officially enshrined a multi-speed Europe.”

That is beneficial to Europe as well as to Britain.

Where I disagree profoundly with the right hon. Gentleman is that I think these trade deals are good for Britain and that the sooner we do the deal with America the better. He is wrong about financial services. There are more people working in financial services in our country outside the City of London than there are inside it. Crucially, what the single market means is that, with one establishment in Britain, we can trade throughout the European Union. If we lose that, we will see jobs going from Britain to other countries.
Let me end on a note of consensus. Labour Governments and Conservative Governments standing here have all had their difficulties with Europe. We have all wanted to get budget down. We have all wanted to get powers returned. We have all found that, because of our love for this House of Commons and for British democracy, this process can sometimes be trying, but, at the end of the day, we have always known that, when it comes to our economy, prosperity and security, we are better off fighting from the inside.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree—I am sure that he will—in referring to the continental press, that he has demonstrated the influence of a British Prime Minister, as he has forced some concessions that will be quite difficult for fellow Presidents and Prime Ministers to sell to their own political establishments? Does he agree that future generations will benefit from some of those concessions, particularly those on enacting the single market, guaranteeing our access to parts of it, deregulating, and engaging in major trade deals with outside? Does he also agree that it is not the politics of fear to point out that those who advocate a no vote do not seem to know what a no vote means? They continually imply that all the benefits that flow from Europe in terms of jobs, investment and security will somehow continue to come here when they have swept away the obligations that previous British Government have always accepted.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for what he has said. It has been interesting to see what some of the foreign newspapers have made of this. Let me give one example. A Spanish paper said:

"British exceptionality reached new heights yesterday. No other country accumulates so many exceptions in Europe." I am proud of the fact that we have a different status in Europe and that that status has become more special with the changes that we have made.

The point that my right hon. and learned Friend makes is absolutely right. I recognise that there are disadvantages to being in the European Union. I make no bones about that, but I can look the British people in the eye and say, "This is what it will be like if we stay in. It will be better because of the deal that we have done."

The people who are advising us to leave must spell out the consequences of leaving. The absolute lodestar is this: no country has been able to get full access to the single market without accepting either paying into the European Communities Act 1972, are made by a majority vote of other countries, are introduced by an unelected Commission, and are enforced by the European Court of Justice? Does he not accept that the only way of getting out of that and returning our democracy is to leave the European Union?

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend has spoken about national Parliaments, democracy and our sovereignty. In his Bloomberg speech, he made it clear that he regarded our national Parliament as the root of our democracy. Yesterday, he referred to the "illusion of sovereignty". Will he explain and repudiate that statement, specifically in relation to the question now before us, our Parliament, our democracy and the making of our laws, which at this moment in time under the European Communities Act 1972, are made by a majority vote of other countries, are introduced by an unelected Commission, and are enforced by the European Court of Justice? Does he not accept that the only way of getting out of that and returning our democracy is to leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: First, I can confirm that I will make, as I have done today, a positive case based on Britain being stronger, Britain being safer, and Britain being better off, but this is a choice. It is important that we set out the choice and the alternative to the British people, because this is potentially the most important decision that people will make on a political issue in their lifetime. I do not want anyone to take a step into the dark without thinking the consequences through properly.

I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman about one thing. Although Brussels and the institutions can be frustrating, we should never forget what brought this institution into being in the first place. Even at the most frustrating times in talks, I look round the table and think of how these countries fought one another and killed one another's people for so long, so the dialogue and action that we take together is positive. As for the vote in Scotland, this is one UK vote.
The Prime Minister: I want to go to the big picture question, which is about how we influence things in our national interest. Let me draw the Prime Minister out on the powerful end to his statement. Of course, by being a member of the European Union, we do not always get out our way, but given what he said to the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), on all the major issues, whether it is trade, climate change or terrorism and security—he can tell us, because he has been the Prime Minister—does he believe we have more influence in the European Union or outside? Surely the answer is that we have more influence inside the European Union, not outside. That is why I passionately believe we must remain in the European Union.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for what he says. I cannot promise to implement many other parts of the Labour manifesto, but I am glad to have been of assistance on this occasion. I absolutely agree with him. The big picture is this: when it comes to getting things done in the world that can help keep people safe in our country, or getting a bigger, better deal on climate change, do we get more because we are in the EU? Yes. Making sure we have sanctions against Iran that really work and get Iran to abandon its nuclear programme—do we do that through the EU and other bodies? Yes, absolutely. On making sure we stand up to Russian aggression in Ukraine, we have been the linchpin between the European Union and the United States of America in making those sanctions count. If we had been outside the European Union during that period, we would have been waiting at the end of the phone to find out what the decisions were going to be. Instead, we were making them, we were driving them, between Europe and America. That is how we get things done for our people.

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): According to the Guido Fawkes website today, there is a letter appearing in The Times tomorrow which has been written by a Chris Hopkins on behalf of organisations across the UK supposedly wishing us to remain. Chris Hopkins is apparently a civil servant. Can the Prime Minister tell us who Chris Hopkins is, which Department he works for, and what authority he has as a civil servant to campaign for the remain lobby?

The Prime Minister: I can answer very simply. He is a civil servant working in No. 10 and his authority comes from me. He is doing an excellent job. This is not a free-for-all. The Government have a clear view, which is that we should remain in a reformed European Union, and the civil service is able to support the Government in that role. Members of Parliament, Ministers and Cabinet Ministers are able to make their own decision, but the Government are not holding back or hanging back from this. We have a full-throated view that we should put forward in front of the British people so that they can make their choice.

Alan Johnson (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am tempted to ask whether the Prime Minister thinks blonds have more fun, but I will actually ask whether he remembers the analysis his Government did in 2014 of the European arrest warrant. It concluded that the European arrest warrant acts as a deterrent to offenders coming to this country. Will he point that out to his Work and Pensions Secretary, and will he ask the
Home Secretary to brief the Work and Pensions Secretary on all the other reasons why Britain is safer and more secure in the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The European arrest warrant is a good case in point. All of us who have this concern about sovereignty and the rest of it had our concerns about the arrest warrant, but look at what has happened in practice. When, in 2005, terrorists tried to bomb our city for a second time, one of them escaped and was arrested and returned to Britain within weeks under a European arrest warrant. Before that, it could have taken years. So I think we can all see that the practical application of these changes definitely keeps us more safe.

When it comes to this question of fighting terrorism and cross-border crime, obviously people are going to have different opinions. I would urge people, though, to listen to the head of the Association of Chief Police Officers, to listen to the former director of MI5, to listen to the head of Europol. These are people who know what they speak of, and they are very, very clear: these measures help us to stay safe.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Having spent the best part of the recess in the Arctic circle with the Royal Marines, I am extremely conscious of the need to ensure that every one of our serving military personnel can cast their vote—to leave or to remain—in the forthcoming EU referendum, which the Prime Minister has worked so hard to get on to the statute books for us. Will he please confirm that every serving member of our armed forces, wherever they are in the world, will be entitled to vote? Will he guarantee that they will receive their ballot papers in good time, and will he confirm how we will ensure that everyone is counted?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend clearly had a more entertaining recess than I did—I am rather jealous. There were moments when I wished I was in the Arctic circle. I can tell you. I believe that the arrangements are absolutely the same as for a general election. We have now four months until the referendum, so there is plenty of time to put in place the arrangements that she seeks.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I pay credit to the Prime Minister for delivering a referendum to the British people. I well remember the time he came to this House and argued against a referendum, but I am glad he came round to supporting those of us who believed that holding one was the right thing to do. He will know that we on the Democratic Unionist party Benches are extremely disappointed that we do not have, as a result of his deal, control over our sovereignty, over our borders or over our finances.

The Prime Minister said in his statement that it is “simply not enough” for those on the leave side “to say that it will be all right on the night and we will work it out”—he wants definite facts. When, therefore, will migrants coming to the United Kingdom begin to be eligible for some benefits? He should tell us when they will be put into the treaty as well.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Last week’s decision requires treaty change to be both irreversible and legally binding. When will the ratification procedure begin?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that my right hon. Friend is not right. It is already legally binding and irreversible, because this is a decision of 28 Governments to reach a legally binding decision that is then deposited as a legal document at the UN, so this could be reversed only if all 28 members, including the UK, were to come to a different decision. But the document sets out very clearly that two specific areas—the changes that we need to the treaty on ever closer union, and safeguards for businesses and countries outside the eurozone—will be put into the treaty as well.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Mayor of London, who has been touted as the leader of the leave campaign, said yesterday that Britain would easily be able to “negotiate a large number of trade deals at great speed” because we “used to run the biggest empire” in the world has ever seen. Will the Prime Minister invite the Mayor to wake up to the 21st century, in which the European economy is six times larger than the British economy and in which it took seven years for Canada to get a trade deal? Does he agree that with so much uncertainty in the world economy, it would be deeply disruptive to increase the risks for British exporters, British manufacturers and British jobs?

The Prime Minister: Where I share the frustration of many of those who are questioning whether we should stay in is that Britain does need trade deals to be signed rapidly, and we do find it frustrating that Europe is not moving faster, because the Korean free trade agreement has been excellent, and we want to push ahead with Japan, with Canada, with America, and with China—and because of this document, all those things are more likely. Where I think the right hon. Lady has a good point is that you cannot sign trade deals with other countries until you have determined the nature of your relationship with the EU from the outside. That would take at least two years, and then you have to think, how long does it take to sign trade deals? The Canada deal is now, I think, in its seventh year and is still not put in place, so I worry that this is a recipe for uncertainty and risk. Businesses literally would not know what the arrangements were for year after year, and British business, British jobs and our country would suffer as a result.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): My 1998 pamphlet calling for us to address the question of our role in the world via a referendum on our EU membership may have escaped the Prime Minister’s attention, but he will understand why I am absolutely delighted that he has
now provided us with an opportunity to resolve this question for a generation. Does he agree that if the country votes to remain, we must positively commit to the institutions of the European Union to best ensure its success and to move on from the grudging tone that has so dominated our discourse, and that equally the establishment he leads must positively engage with a potential decision to leave and undertake reasonable contingency planning now?

The Prime Minister: Let me make a couple of points to my hon. Friend. First, one of the things this renegotiation does is to address some of the principal grudges that I think this country has rightly had: too much of a single currency club, too much political union, too much in terms of migration and lack of respect for welfare systems, not enough competitiveness and removing bureaucracy. Having dealt with some of these grudges, yes, it may be possible to make sure that we get more things done that suit us. I would also agree with something that the Mayor of London said, which is that we need to make sure that we have high-quality British officials in every part of the organisation so that we can help to drive its agenda. My hon. Friend is right that this should be done to settle the issue for a generation. He is also right that we will be publishing the alternatives to membership so that people can see what they are and that there are plans that could be made.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that great reform has been granted in the renegotiation. Why, then, did the French President say that the European Union has not granted the United Kingdom any special dispensations from its rules in the deal that has been struck, and go on to say that the Prime Minister had accepted that the City of London would not have special status compared with Europe’s other stock exchanges? Why is there such a difference between what the French President is saying and what the Prime Minister is saying?

The Prime Minister: The French Foreign Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, said:

“The agreement with the British is a recognition that there is a differentiated Europe”.

I have already quoted the Slovakian and Hungarian Prime Ministers and the former Italian Commissioner, and François Hollande said:

“We have recognised Britain’s position—not in Schengen, not in the Euro Zone, she does not subscribe to the Charter of Fundamental Rights”.

They are recognising that Britain has a special status in Europe.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Although the referendum decision—in or out—is a matter for the British people, as the leader of an Atlanticist party, does the Prime Minister recognise and acknowledge the concerns of the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department and international players that have already been mentioned that Britain and Europe need to stand together in an unsafe world?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I do not believe that the American view is based simply on, “Well, it’s easier to make one phone call rather than many.” I think it is based on the fact that they believe that Britain will be a stronger partner and more able to get things done and to bend the will of other countries in our and America’s direction when it comes to solving great crises. If we ask ourselves how we have managed to massively reduce pirate attacks off Somalia, and how we are going to try to fix the problem of Libya’s border, then we see that, yes, we can act unilaterally, and yes, there are valuable partnerships in NATO, but EU partnerships are worth a lot too.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the pound has slid to its lowest level for seven years on the news that the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has joined the leave campaign, are we not just getting a glimpse of the major economic upheaval that could follow if we leave the European Union? Is that not a timely reminder that the long-term best interests of our country should come ahead of party politicking and personal ambition?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we look in detail at the full economic impacts of either staying in or choosing to leave the EU. We will set out that approach in the weeks and months to come so that people can see what the dangers and risks are and what the case is.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Do not the common agricultural, fishing and energy policies do damage to domestic producers and add to the colossal deficit we always run with the rest of the EU while running a trade surplus with the rest of the world? What can we do about those unfairnesses if we stay in the European Union?

The Prime Minister: We have made a lot of progress in recent years. The wine lakes and butter mountains are a thing of the past. We have made big reforms to the common fisheries policy. I know that my right hon. Friend studies these things very closely, but although we have a deficit with the EU on goods, we have a substantial surplus when it comes to services. We have to think about the future and how we safeguard the services industries as well as making sure that our position in the single market is open.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Opening up EU markets in areas such as energy and digital services could create hundreds of thousands of jobs in future. Does the Prime Minister agree that remaining part of the EU would give the UK a strong voice in making sure that the completion of that single market happens, and would get the best deal for British business and jobs?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an important point, which is that Britain has a strong voice in the EU to get these single markets completed. The declaration on competitiveness from the EU Commission is worth reading. She also points out that, if we were not there, not only would the EU continue to exist and have a very big impact on our lives, but it would probably head in a very different and more protectionist direction, and that would affect us, in many ways quite badly.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will no doubt have been deluged with advice on EU law during his negotiation, so on the subject of ever closer union, can he give us a concrete example of a
single European Court of Justice case that would have had a different outcome if the measures he agreed last week had been in place at the time?

**The Prime Minister:** Ever closer union has been mentioned in a series of judgments by the European Court of Justice, and there are two things in what we have agreed that I think will have an impact. Obviously, the most eye-catching of those is in paragraph 1 on page 10, which states that the substance of the agreements “will be incorporated into the Treaties at the time of their next revision” and will “make it clear that the references to ever closer union do not apply to the United Kingdom.”

That is obviously a carve-out for us, but just as significant—and this is something that many other countries did not want—is the content of the next paragraph, which states:

“The references in the Treaties and their preambles...of creating an ever closer union...do not offer a legal basis for extending the scope of any provision of the Treaties or of EU secondary legislation.”

That redefinition of ever closer union is a fundamental change to the way in which the organisation has worked. One way to think of it is that there have been two threats to our sovereignty. The first came from treaty change passing powers from Britain to Brussels, but that cannot happen now because of our lock. The second is the use of terms such as “ever closer union” to make sure that the EU grows its powers, but that cannot be done now that we have that change. One of the reasons why the deal took 40 hours of all-night negotiations is that not everybody likes it. The deal is not meaningless words; it is words that mean something, that matter and that make a difference. That is why I was so determined to secure it.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): The Prime Minister was elected on 37% of the vote. Even if half those people were to vote in, the referendum can be won only on the basis of people who voted Labour, Scottish National party, Liberal, Plaid Cymru and Green. Is it not a reasonable supposition to make that those people will be more interested in a positive articulation of the case for Europe than in the factional arguments of the Conservative party, entertaining though they are? When will the Prime Minister put forward that positive case for Europe?

**The Prime Minister:** I do not want to upset the right hon. Gentleman, because I am hoping that he will be supportive. In the speech that I made today, I set out a positive case. Yes, it is the case of someone who is Eurosceptical in the genuine sense: I am sceptical about all organisations and about all engagements. We should always question whether organisations work for us, and we should be doubtful about such things. That is what being sceptical means.

I come at this as someone who has their doubts about Brussels and doubts about the EU, but I have an absolutely clear eye about what is best for Britain. If others want to argue from a more positive stance about the nature of the EU, fine—go for it. It is up to everyone to make their own case, but I am going to make my case in a clear-eyed determination of what is in Britain’s interest, and I think I did that today.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Prime Minister has centred much of the renegotiation on immigration, so can he tell the House, in his estimation, by how much the welfare changes will reduce immigration from the EU in the coming year?

**The Prime Minister:** Anyone who knows that, at the moment, someone can come from the EU and get up to £10,000 of in-work welfare benefits in the first year knows that that is a big incentive to come to Britain. Many people said that we would never be able to get changes to in-work benefits, but we have got those changes. If we pass this legislation we will see, in 2017, a seven-year period up to 2024 in which we will be restricting these welfare claims. That, plus all the changes that the Home Secretary helped to secure—in many cases reversing ECJ judgments—will actually restore to our country powers over welfare and powers over immigration that can make a real difference.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): Plaid Cymru supports our membership of the EU. We also support further reform, and we will campaign accordingly. Were we to leave, what would happen to measures such as convergence funding, which has provided large amounts of money for the poorer areas of west Wales and the valleys?

**The Prime Minister:** The short answer is that if we were to leave the EU, we would not be able to get those funds, which have made a big difference in parts of Wales, in parts of England—for instance, in Cornwall—and in other parts of our country. I am someone who wants to keep the EU budget down, and we achieved the historic decision to cut it, but I think we should be frank that some of the work that the EU has done in poorer countries in other parts of the EU has helped those economies to grow. They are all customers of ours, so whether it is Bulgaria, Romania, Greece or wherever, their economic development is in our interests.

**Mrs Anne Main** (St Albans) (Con): In January, I introduced a Bill to try to protect our children from flammable costumes—to protect children from going up in flames. I pulled the Bill this month after discussions with officials from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, who told me that the matter comes under harmonised legislation. Thousands of directives are spewed out from Brussels every year with which the Government have to comply. We cannot even protect our own children on something so fundamental, because we do not have control without the permission of Brussels.

**The Prime Minister:** I will look carefully at the case my hon. Friend has mentioned, because I know that such things can be frustrating. In the area of foam-filled furniture and foam-filled mattresses, we have taken steps over and above what other EU countries have done, and that has kept our own people safer. The other thing I would say is that a lot of different figures are bandied about on the matter, but if she looks in the House of Commons Library, she will see that far from the very high figures quoted by some, more like 13%, 14% or 15% of laws come to us from that direction.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): May I commend the Prime Minister for his statement and congratulate him on successfully persuading his European...
counters to sign up to the renegotiation. He has of course been less successful in persuading half the Conservative party to support him. Will he accept that although his renegotiation may have been successful, it is not central to how most people will make up their minds? When we belong to a European single market that is worth £80 billion a year to this country, the real question is are we better off in or out? When we are facing huge insecurities and dangers in this world, are we better off alongside our friends and neighbours, or outside on our own? When we face huge international challenges, such as climate change and the refugee crisis, are we better off working with others, or isolated on our own? Will he join me in our shared ambition for a Britain in Europe, not the blond ambition behind him?

The Prime Minister: The renegotiation was aimed at dealing with some of the legitimate grievances that we have had in the UK for many years about the way in which the EU works. We felt it was too much of a single currency club and too much of a political union, and was not enough about competitiveness and had not enough protections in terms of welfare and immigration. I believe the renegotiation and agreement go a long way to dealing with each of those problems.

Now is the time, as the hon. Gentleman says, for the even bigger argument about the future of our country and about what sort of country we want to live in for ourselves, and our children and grandchildren. It is a huge issue, and on the points he makes about Britain being strong in the world and able to get things done, I would argue that our membership of NATO matters and our membership of the UN matters, but our membership of the EU also gives us force and power to get things done in the world.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): On these Benches we are rightly proud of our record on the drop in unemployment, the record growth—best in the G7—and the reduction in our deficit. During my right hon. Friend’s many meetings, did he find anybody, even a single person, who suggested we might get better terms, on our exit, to achieve even better outside the European community?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. There is good will towards Britain because of the contribution we make to the EU. There is understanding of the problems and difficulties that we have had. Therefore, with a huge amount of diplomacy—travel and meetings and everything else—it has been possible to get, I think, a good agreement for Britain. As I said in my statement, if we were somehow to kick over the table and ask for a second one, I do not think that would be remotely feasible.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I particularly welcome the equalisation of the spouse visa rules, which discriminated unfairly against British citizens? May I also ask the Prime Minister to recognise the work of the Minister for Europe? I managed only two years in the job; he has done six, and he has still retained his sanity—almost.

On the other big issue, the migration crisis, the British head of Europol said today that 5,000 jihadists are now within the European Union area. Many of them have come in through the external border of the EU. What additional help is being given to Greece and Italy, in particular, to try to deal with protecting the external border, with the support of Frontex?

The Prime Minister: First, let me thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the Europe Minister, who was with me in Brussels for this marathon negotiation—I thought his eyes were shutting for a minute there. He has been doing the job for six years, and has done it extremely well.

The point about spousal visas is important. For many years, we argued that this needed to be sorted out, and for many years the EU said back, “Well, if you want to equalise the rules, change your own rules.” Now, we have in effect managed to change its rules, so it is a real breakthrough.

In terms of the help that we are giving to Italy and Greece, the discussions in Brussels were very intense because the numbers really have to be reduced, and reduced radically. That is why I strongly support, and Britain will contribute to, the maritime operation—it will have strong NATO support, as well as EU support—to try to bring together Greece and Turkey, with a common information picture or common intelligence about what is happening, so we can stop so many of these criminal gangs operating in the area. Without that, there will not be the right chance of getting this situation under control.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): For decades, British Ministers who have had involvement with Europe—I include myself in this—have been tempted to exaggerate the influence we bring to bear and conceal our inability to achieve British interests. Is that why it took a freedom of information request to establish that over the last two decades, Britain has voted against 72 measures in the European Council and been defeated 72 times, and that the pace of defeat is accelerating? If we make the mistake of taking the risk of remaining in the EU, how many defeats does the Prime Minister expect over the next two decades?

The Prime Minister: I do not for one minute underestimate the frustrations and challenges of being a member of this organisation. The research that I have seen—perhaps I will write to my right hon. Friend with a copy of it—states that deep analysis of whether a country achieves its position shows that Britain does so in 90% of cases, which even, I think, outranks the Germans. I have seen for myself that when we work hard and form alliances, we can get things done.

The other point I make to my right hon. Friend is that if we are outside the single market, the same countries will write the rules, but without us. We will have to comply with them when we sell into Europe, but will have absolutely no say over what they are. That, to me, is the illusion of sovereignty, rather than real sovereignty.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): I accept the symbolism of removing the phrase “ever closer union”, but if we are to believe that it will have legal consequences, the Prime Minister owes it to the House to give at least one or two examples of where that was the sole legal basis for a decision.

The Prime Minister: I am happy to write to the right hon. Lady with the details because those words have been used in a whole series of cases. That is why the point was so hard-fought.
Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I point out to my right hon. Friend that article 50 did not exist in the treaties until the Lisbon treaty, which he used to oppose and now agrees with? There are many ways of leaving the European Union that might not involve article 50. He does not want to bind himself into the article 50 framework. Will he give this some thought, rather than committing himself to a policy that he obviously does not support?

The Prime Minister: Whether we like it or not—frankly, I do not particularly like it—the treaty on European Union sets out the way in which a country leaves. It is called article 50 and I think people should read it. If you want to leave, leave. If you want to stay, stay. What I find slightly odd is the idea of voting to leave to try and half stay. I do not think the British public would understand it, I do not think our European partners would understand it and I am at a loss to understand it as well. I thought that we wanted to have a referendum and to make a choice.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister think President Putin would rather see a strong Britain standing in a strong Europe or Britain breaking away from the European Union and, potentially, Europe breaking apart?

The Prime Minister: It is certainly true that Vladimir Putin likes to see disunity in the west, whether it is over sanctions, Syria or Russian conduct in other issues. There is no doubt in my mind, having sat at the European Council table, that the alliance between the Baltic states and Poland—which see at first hand the problems being created by Putin—countries such as Britain, which should always stand up to aggression, and the French and Germans has made Europe's position stronger. If we were not there, I do not think we could guarantee that and I am at a loss to understand it as well. I thought that we wanted to have a referendum and to make a choice.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): In October, Lord Rose, the chairman of the pro-EU BSE campaign, said: “Nothing is going to happen if we come out of Europe in the first five years, probably. There will be absolutely no change.” I hope that my right hon. Friend finds it reassuring to hear that from the head of the campaign to stay in. Does he agree that it is inevitable that after the public vote to leave, there will be a period of informal discussions before the formal process is triggered?

The Prime Minister: I have great respect for my hon. Friend who is leading the campaign with great vim, vigour and passion, but surely if you want Britain to leave the EU you want things to change rather than not to change. The truth is that article 50 is the only way to leave. It says that you spend two years negotiating your status outside the EU and that if that cannot be agreed at the end of those two years then, unless all 27 other member states agree to extend the process, you leave. On leaving, if you have not got a deal, you do not know what your relationship is with the single market and you do not know what your relationship is with the 53 countries covered by the trading deals. You do not really know very much. My argument is: do not take that risk. Stay in a reformed European Union. What I think the leave campaign will have to do at some stage is explain what it is they want once we have left.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the Prime Minister for his detailed statement. Does he accept that, with Ireland and Britain so closely connected economically and living, as it were, in each other’s shadow, a UK exit from the European Union would have particular implications for Ireland, north and south? Indications suggest there may be some initial financial savings for the UK, but that huge losses are likely to follow. We have seen today the impact on sterling. That financial impact would be negative and slow—we would not see the full impact today or tomorrow. Recent polls suggest that 75% of people in Northern Ireland want to stay in the EU. Does the Prime Minister agree that a UK exit from the EU would have a particularly detrimental impact on Northern Ireland’s economy, and on its hard-won peace process and stability?

The Prime Minister: First, let me pay tribute and thanks to the Taoiseach, the leader of the Republic, who was probably one of the strongest voices in support of Britain’s renegotiation and in making sure we achieved a good settlement. In terms of Northern Ireland, everyone in Northern Ireland will have a vote and every vote counts the same. I urge people to exercise their democratic right. I look forward to going to Northern Ireland, as part of the campaign, to talk directly to people about why I believe we should stay.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): Acknowledging that some people believe that our European neighbours want to do us down at every turn, is it credible to suppose that if we were to leave, those selfsame people could believe that our former partners would fall over themselves to give us free access to the single market, which is the vital foundation for our business and industry to trade across the world?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I feel that very deeply. Having tried to build up the good will for a special status for Britain within the EU, which is what we have achieved, I do not believe that that good will would in any way be there were we to decide to leave. My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is why the safe option, the certain option, the option without risk is to stay in the reformed EU, rather than to take this leap in the dark.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): As the Prime Minister outlines the potentially grave consequences for the UK of leaving in terms of our economy and our security, we can perhaps all reflect on the wisdom of the leadership decisions that will lead to us perhaps facing those consequences in a few months’ time.

The side that wants to leave has put sovereignty and control at the heart of its argument. Does the Prime Minister agree that if we swap from a position where we are a decision-maker at the top table, we will be moving from a position of being a rule-maker to being a rule-taker, and that that is not sovereignty, it is not control and it is not the best future for the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said in the first part of his question. I think it is time for a referendum. Too many treaties have passed through this House with no referendum, whether Maastricht under the Conservatives or Lisbon
under Labour. I think that sapped people’s faith in our democracy and in our accountability. I particularly remember the moment when Tony Blair stood here and said, “Let battle be joined” and all the rest of it. We really thought a referendum was coming and then it was taken away. It is right to have this referendum, and we should not be frightened of asking the people and trusting the people.

I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that if we want to ask the question of how we can have greater control and greater influence, the answer is to be in there helping to make the rules, rather than outside simply taking the rules.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on securing for Britain the special status he talked about earlier. Does he agree that the problem with the debate so far is that those who want to leave Europe are completely unable to agree on an alternative arrangement for Britain in the EU that would deliver the same sort of economic and security benefits that his renegotiation secures?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Today’s discussions have revealed a lack of agreement not only about what Britain’s future looks like outside the EU, but about whether we really should leave, as some people want to vote leave in the hope of a different deal. Then there is not really agreement about how we should leave, whether it be by article 50 or through some other process that can be followed. I am absolutely clear that the only way of leaving is through article 50. There is no second renegotiation; there is no second referendum. The choice is in or out. I think we now need to move on to debate what those things really mean.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Can the Prime Minister tell us, beyond the areas specifically addressed in the deal agreed last week, in which way his Government’s plans have been constrained by European legislation or regulation?

The Prime Minister: There is no doubt that we do face constraints, because the single market works through a common set of rules that have to be agreed. As has been said, we do not always get our way, although I would argue that we get our way far more often than we do not. There are occasions when we lose a vote and we are constrained by EU regulation or legislation. The question I think we now need to put in a very hard-headed “Realpolitik” sense is this: “If you are outside, does this give you the full control and sovereignty that you seek?” It does not, because we still have to trade with Europe and accept the rules. The only thing achieved is to have removed ourselves from the conversation and taken away our vote.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): The Prime Minister has said that this will settle the issue for a generation. I am blessed with five grandchildren and I believe that it is in their best interests that I vote to remain within the European Union. There is another generation that is a matter of some concern. Thousands of people who have paid UK taxes and national insurance over the years are now living in other parts of Europe. My right hon. Friend knows that I have sought to represent the interests of those people. They are very frightened indeed. Can he tell them what will happen to them if we leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for deciding to support the case for remaining in the EU. He raises an important point. We often look at free movement in terms of people’s decision to come here, but we also need to think about the many British people who have chosen to work, live or retire in other parts of the EU. The short answer to my hon. Friend’s question is that I can tell those people what it will be like if we stay, but I cannot be absolutely certain about what would happen if we leave. It would depend on a complex and difficult negotiation, and I think there would be a lot of uncertainty. I would urge all those people, who have the right to vote, to make sure that they exercise it. We should perhaps think particularly about people in Gibraltar who are all able to vote in this referendum.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment in his statement today to speak plainly over the next four months about what he believes is right for our country. As he develops that argument, will he bear in mind that 9 million people voted Labour at the last general election and that their sympathies and values do not naturally lie with his party so he needs to develop a conversation with them as well?

The Prime Minister: I certainly take on board the right hon. Gentleman’s point, but this is not a party political issue. This is an issue for all people and all voters to get involved in. They might vote Conservative at a general election but decide to vote either in or out in the referendum—and the same with Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green or whatever. This should be a giant democratic exercise in accountability. We are asking questions about sovereignty, but this is a huge sovereign decision by the British people. I know I can sometimes upset Labour voters, but I would say to them, “Put aside what you think about this Government or that rule or that law, and think about the future of your country. Think about the big picture and then make the choice.”

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Be nice for a change.

The Prime Minister: I’m always nice.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Prime Minister said that crime should be at the forefront of our thoughts when we are voting in the referendum. Can he therefore tell us how many crimes were committed in the UK by other EU nationals in the year before free movement of people came into effect, and how many were committed by other EU nationals last year? How many other EU nationals were in the UK prison system before free movement of people came into operation and how many are there now? I am sure that my right hon. Friend must have that information, given that crime is such a big thing for him. If he has not got it, perhaps he will write to me with that information.
The Prime Minister: I do not have all those figures to hand, but what I can say to my hon. Friend is that because of the very hard work done by the Home Secretary, we will be able to bar more criminals from coming to Britain, and we will have longer re-entry bans. We are solving problems that the European Court of Justice has put in our way. As for prisoners, the prisoner transfer agreement that we negotiated will mean that we can get foreign prisoners out of our prisons and into their jails. Outside the EU, that would be far more difficult—perhaps impossible—to achieve.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I think that I am the only Member who was elected to the European Parliament in 1979, at the same time as the father of the Mayor of London—who, I must say, talked a lot more sense than his son. We were then on opposite sides. I changed my mind. After two years in the European Parliament, I saw the benefits of working with people from other nations.

David Davis (Halton) (Con): With respect, any country that we negotiate with will mean that we can get foreign prisoners out of our prisons and into their jails. Outside the EU, that would be far more difficult—perhaps impossible—to achieve.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for her honesty in saying that she had changed her mind. I am happy to say that I have changed my mind as well. After two years in the European Parliament, I saw the benefits of working with people from other nations.

[Interruption.] Cynics! We talked about acid rain, and about restructuring and its social effects on people who worked in the older industries. I gained enormously from working with people of other nationalities, and I hope that the Prime Minister will emphasise, again and again, the importance of internationalism.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for her honesty in saying that she had changed her mind when she was sitting with Stanley Johnson: two blonde bombshells, if you like, in the same European Parliament. I remember campaigning with Stanley Johnson, and if the good people of Newton Abbot had decided to vote the right way in, I think, 2005—or perhaps it was 2010—he would be sitting here, and we would have been able to hear from him as well as from the Mayor of London.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): With respect, why does the Prime Minister “bang on” so much about east European migration? After all, the Poles have a wonderful record in this country of coming here, not for benefits but to work hard and integrate. Is it not much more worrying that millions are pouring into Europe from north Africa and the middle east? Has the Prime Minister any idea of the proportion of those people who will exercise their right to come here once they have their German passports? If we remain in the EU, the channel will be about as useful in stopping them as a trilling Macedonian stream.

The Prime Minister: I promise to “bang on” for the next four months, but I hope to “bang on” considerably less about this subject after that.

My hon. Friend has made an important point. Obviously we have the advantage of being outside Schengen, so foreign nationals coming to other European countries do not have automatic access to the UK. We can stop them coming in, as indeed we can stop European citizens who we think may be a risk to our country. The factual answer to my hon. Friend’s question, however, is that, after 10 years, only about 2.2% of the refugees and others who have arrived in Germany have German citizenship, so the evidence to date is that there is not a huge risk of very early grants of citizenship to these people. Nevertheless, I agree that we need to act, and if we are involved, we are more likely to act to try and stem the flow of migrants in the first place. What is happening now in the NATO-led operation between Greece and Italy is happening partly because of a UK intervention in this debate, taken with the French, the Germans and the Italians. When we are around that table, we can get things done.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree that the claim that staying in the European Union would make an attack on our shores more likely is deeply irresponsible and factually wrong?

The Prime Minister: I am struggling to find the right page in my notes, on which there is a quotation. Ah, here we are.

I think that this is important, because we should be clear about the advantages and the disadvantages of the organisation. I have become convinced of this: when we are fighting terrorism and crime, we rely on the police, the security and intelligence services and the “Five Eyes” partnership, and I have seen at first hand that our partnership with America is incredibly powerful when it comes to keeping us safe, but I have also seen in recent years just how much this European co-operation matters.

I am thinking of, for instance, the Schengen Information System and the European Criminal Records Information System, and the passage of information between our organisations. Hugh Orde, former president of the Association of Chief Police Officers, was very clear yesterday. He said that staying in Europe and co-operating with our European allies is essential to keeping British people safe:

“The European arrest warrant lets us deport terrorist suspects back to their country of origin. Europol helps our police co-operate with their European counterparts, and EU data-sharing measures allow our security services to access information on threats from anywhere in Europe within minutes.”

That is a very powerful statement from someone who clearly knows what they are talking about.

Of course, outside the EU we could try to negotiate bilateral agreements either with every country or with every system and every organisation, but I do think people will ask: “Why give up a system that is working to keep us safe when it could take so long to try and replicate it?” And then, even when we have replicated it, as Norway has tried to do with Europol, Europol is very clear: the Norwegians do not get the access or the personnel or the extra safety we get by being a full member.

Sir Edward Leigh: Damian Green! We talked about acid rain, and about restructuring and its social effects on people who worked in the older industries. I gained enormously from working with people of other nationalities, and I have become convinced of this: when we are fighting terrorism and crime, we rely on the police, the security and intelligence services and the “Five Eyes” partnership, and I have seen at first hand that our relationship with America is incredibly powerful when it comes to keeping us safe, but I have also seen in recent years just how much this European co-operation matters.

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Damian Green: Two hundred thousand of our UK firms trade with the EU and it accounts for just under half our total trade. Given that the EU is the only big world trading bloc in which we have a say in setting the rules, would it not be absurd to give away that say? Would it not betray those 200,000 firms and lead to fewer jobs, less growth and damage to our economy?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. While it would be good if the World Trade Organisation was signing more multilateral trade deals, there has not been a successful round for 22 years. So if we are interested in driving free trade and market access in the world today, we need to be part of a bloc that can sign good and effective deals. We have seen that with Korea and with Singapore, and we now need to see it with all the other countries that the EU is doing these
Government's policy basically, whether we leave and make our own path. Is the made in June as to whether we stay with a failed body or that I fundamentally agree with: a final decision to be a final decision. It is the one sentence of his statement Minister has said in his statement that we are to make a not a member of? In this failed organisation, the Prime to mention the eurozone which, thank heavens, we are system that is betraying people who get to Europe, not that makes us fundamentally uncompetitive, an immigration policy, a single market that shackles us with regulation failed common fisheries policy, a failed common agricultural so little, and that the EU is a failing organisation—a show the problem: that for so much labour he has achieved Haribo—in implementing the Labour party manifesto 40 hours—apparently four clean shirts and a packet of May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on spending the incomes and prospects of families across our country? about how long it could take to get a deal to safeguard those jobs be? What would we say to those companies would get that deal on goods relatively quickly because would be a danger if we were to leave that maybe we in services and it is in the single market in services where the prospects for progress are greatest today. So there would be a danger if we were to leave that maybe we would get that deal on goods relatively quickly because of our deficit, but if they held up the deal on services where would all our service companies be? Where would those jobs be? What would we say to those companies about how long it could take to get a deal to safeguard the incomes and prospects of families across our country? deals with. As I have said, of course outside the EU we can sign deals, but the information I have from country after country is “Yes, we’d do a deal but only after we’ve fixed our deal with the EU,” and that is likely to be a bigger deal and a better deal. So I think the argument on this trade deal issue very much goes one way.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Britain has an enormous trade deficit with the rest of the EU, amounting to over £60 billion a year, equivalent to over 1 million jobs exported from Britain to the continent, half of them to Germany. Is it not obvious that the EU needs us much more than we need it and the last thing the EU is going to do is start a trade war with Britain?

The Prime Minister: The problem with the hon. Gentleman’s statistics is this: obviously, 50% of our trade is with the EU, but if we take the EU as a whole only about 7% of its trade is with us. So were we to leave the EU and then contemplate the negotiation that would follow, clearly we would not be in the stronger position. I think that is important. The second point I would make—I made this point earlier—is that, yes, we have a trade deficit in goods, but we have a massive trade surplus in services and it is in the single market in services where the prospects for progress are greatest today. So there would be a danger if we were to leave that maybe we would get that deal on goods relatively quickly because of our deficit, but if they held up the deal on services where would all our service companies be? Where would those jobs be? What would we say to those companies about how long it could take to get a deal to safeguard the incomes and prospects of families across our country?

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on spending 40 hours—apparently four clean shirts and a packet of Haribo—in implementing the Labour party manifesto in his conversations in Brussels? Does this not actually show the problem: that for so much labour he has achieved so little, and that the EU is a failing organisation—a failed common fisheries policy, a failed common agricultural policy, a single market that shackles us with regulation that makes us fundamentally uncompetitive, an immigration system that is betraying people who get to Europe, not to mention the eurozone which, thank heavens, we are not a member of? In this failed organisation, the Prime Minister has said in his statement that we are to make a final decision. It is the one sentence of his statement that I fundamentally agree with: a final decision to be made in June as to whether we stay with a failed body or whether we leave and make our own path. Is the Government’s policy basically, “And always keep a-hold of Nurse For fear of finding something worse.”?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, my hon. Friend and I have a profound disagreement about this issue. I very much respect his views because he has held them in good faith for many years, and I have held my view that we need reform, but reform within the EU, for many years. I am sure that we can respect each other in the months of debate ahead.

I do want to take issue a little with my hon. Friend on manifesto delivery. I will not run through the whole thing, but we said that we would legislate for a referendum—we’ve delivered it. We said that we will protect our economy from further integration of the eurozone—that is covered in the settlement. We said that we want powers to flow away from Brussels—that is covered in the settlement. We want national Parliaments to be able to work together to block unwanted European legislation—covered in the settlement. We want an end to our commitment to ever closer union—covered in the settlement. We will ensure that defence policy and national security remain firmly under British national control—covered in the new settlement. We will insist that EU migrants who want to claim tax credits must live here and contribute to our country for four years—covered in the settlement. It is there time and again.

We all stood under this manifesto, and I am proud of it and of the team who put it together and are implementing it. While I say, “Yes, let’s have this vigorous argument”, let us not pretend that we have not delivered the manifesto on which we stood in front of the British people.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that in Slough I am proud to represent an area that has more international headquarters of multinational companies that are investing in Britain than any other place of a similar size. Those companies say to me that they have come here because of the English language, our good transport links, and because we are a gateway to the European market. The bosses of those companies are not saying that very publicly, and during this referendum campaign I invite the Prime Minister to encourage them to talk to those people whose jobs depend on that investment, and to say what would happen if we left Europe, because they tell me that they would leave Britain.

The Prime Minister: I am certainly having that conversation. My message to businesses is: if you have a view, make sure you tell people. Talk to your customers and your suppliers, and above all talk to your employees, your staff and your colleagues, because this issue is so important.

In truth, the business voice, large and small, is very much in favour of Britain staying. Many of them have said quite generous things about this renegotiation because they recognise the dangers, particularly in the area of safeguarding ourselves against discrimination because we are not in the euro. Given that, I hope that business and enterprise will speak clearly in the next four months.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Much of the protection of the euro-outs in this agreement rests on a safeguard mechanism that is set out in annex 2, but as far as I can tell, that requires nothing more than that a discussion be held about the UK’s concerns at ECOFIN— not even the European Council. That leaves eurozone members free to enforce their will by qualified majority voting. Will the Prime Minister explain what—beyond the discussion, which can be ignored—has been achieved by the safeguard mechanism?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely can answer that, and I think it is an important question. There are two things here. First, a set of principles is set out in section A on economic governance, and they are principles of non-discrimination, no cost, and no disadvantage. Crucially,
paragraph 4—this was of real concern to the Bank of England and I know it will be of concern to my right hon. Friend’s Committee—makes it clear that the financial stability of member states whose currency is not the euro is a matter for their own authorities and own budgetary responsibility. Those principles are very important, and what is exciting about this is not only that they have been set out for the first time, and not only has Europe for the first time accepted that there are other currencies inside the European Union, but those changes will be incorporated into the treaties. The mechanism is something over and above a new way of ensuring that issues are raised, should we wish to raise them, at the level of the European Council. We do not have that protection today, but making the principles part of the treaty—already an international legally binding decision—is hugely important. If my right hon. Friend listens to people who speak on behalf of financial services, the Bank of England and others, he will recognise that this is really important progress for Britain.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): There is still plenty that divides the Prime Minister and me politically, but on this and in the national interest I think he is right to be campaigning for Britain to remain in the European Union. Let me read a quote to him: “leaving would cause at least some business uncertainty, while embroiling the Government for several years in a fiddly process of negotiating new arrangements, so diverting energy from the real problems of this country”.

That was on 7 February. The Mayor of London was right 15 days ago, wasn’t he?

The Prime Minister: What I would say to the hon. Gentleman—and to everyone—is that we must examine what the alternatives are, how much uncertainty there will be, and how long these processes will take. Therein lies the importance of this decision for businesses, families and people’s prospects up and down our country.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that one of the key benefits of his agreement is to give legal clarity to Britain’s special status within the EU? He will be aware of the uncertainties there have been for those advising the Government on the law, which this resolves. Does he also agree that it is wrong to say that this is not legally binding when it is, and that it is irreversible unless we choose otherwise? For those who want to look at the legal niceties, I point to a very long opinion by Professor Sir Alan Dashwood, Queen’s Counsel, the leading EU constitutional lawyer in this country, which can be read on the Henderson chambers website.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for what he has said, given that he was a senior Law Officer in the Government. I have also listened very carefully to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who could not have been clearer on this point. I have also read the judgment by Dashwood and seen the Government’s own legal advice, all of which says that this is legally binding and irreversible. People who question that should look at the Danish protocol, which has been in existence and worked very well for 23 years.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Prime Minister share my concerns and worries that after 70 years of peace and prosperity any nation begins to take that for granted, as well as the institutions that created that peace and prosperity? I was born on the August weekend in London at the height of the battle of Britain—[Interruption.] Unimaginable. My generation and many people in this country with longer memories know that peace and prosperity are not guaranteed unless we work together across Europe to maintain them day after day, month after month and year after year.

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is worth remembering why this came about in the first place, which was the appalling bloodshed on our continent. People of my generation, very much post-war children, should remember that and then look afresh at the institutions of the EU and try to ensure that this organisation works for this century rather than the last one. That is part of what this agreement is about. I absolutely agree, and I remember, for instance, a meeting of the European Council we once had at the Cloth Hall in Ypres: one cannot sit in that building without thinking of the slaughter that European countries have engaged in in the past.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I, too, salute my right hon. Friend for honoursuring his commitment to the British people to offer them a referendum and for his extraordinary stamina over the last week or so while we have been enjoying the recess, but I am afraid that for me this is not the fundamental reform that we were promised. My right hon. Friend has made much of security in his answers today and in the past few weeks, but does he not agree that the security of Europe is dependent on NATO and not on the EU, that it is NATO that is protecting us from further incursion by President Putin, and that we do NATO no good by suggesting that somehow the EU has some competence in this area?

The Prime Minister: I have huge respect for my hon. Friend, who served brilliantly in the last Government, helping to strengthen our defences. I have to say that perhaps 10 or 15 years ago, I might have said the same—that defence was really about NATO and our partnership with America and not about the EU. However, when we consider defence and security in the round today, and how we fight terrorism, yes, it depends on those other relationships, but it also depends on what we do through the EU. I see that every day through the exchange of information. For example, let us take the agreement we also reached at this Council to ensure a strong NATO mission to try to help the situation between Greece and Turkey. It is a NATO mission, which backs up my hon. Friend’s point, but where was some of the conversation about it going on? Where were the Germans, the British and the French sitting together to work out what assets we could supply and how we could get real power into it? It was done around the European Council table. The fact is that we need both. To keep safe in the modern world, to fight terrorism, to fight criminality and to stand up to evil around the world, we must use all the organisations, not just some of them.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): The Prime Minister has played fast and loose with our cultural, social and economic future in Europe for a series of concessions that seem to do nothing to satisfy his Eurosceptic Front Benchers and Back Benchers. Will he now guarantee that his Government’s case for remaining in the EU will stop appeasing them, and instead focus...
on the many positives of the EU, counteract the leave campaign’s narrow, negative focus on immigration, and commit to ensuring that the public have sufficient information to make a positive, informed choice?

The Prime Minister: We will certainly be fighting a very positive campaign. That campaign will involve a series of documents, some of which were mandated by the other place when it amended the referendum Bill, so we need to set out the alternatives to membership, and the rights and obligations here—the things you get out of and the obligations you have in the EU. We will be talking about the economic case. We will address all those issues. I say to those who are interested in some of the cultural or educational arguments that they should come forward, too. We need a strong voice from universities, as they have a lot to say about this issue—they get a lot out of Europe—and cultural organisations should be speaking out, too.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that when this country, in our national interest, makes an international agreement of any kind, it may involve a loss of sovereignty? That may be the case through any trade deal, through trading under World Trade Organisation rules and on the single most important decision this House of Commons could take: whether or not to engage in military action. We are treaty-bound by NATO, under article 5, to go to the defence of a fellow member that is under armed attack—that obliges us. In that sense, we have lost sovereignty because we believe it is in the interests of the country to enter that agreement and that it has made us safer. If the claim of “sovereignty” and its loss were the trump card, would not all those international agreements have to be torn up?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point: if your only determination was never to cede any technical sovereignty, you would never join any of these organisations, you would not do a trade deal and you probably would not be a member of the UN, the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. Therefore, the question really is: what maximises our power, influence and ability to get things done? As the Transport Secretary put it so brilliantly at the Cabinet meeting, “I would love to live in utopia but I expect the EU would probably be there, too.” That is to say, you do not abolish the EU by leaving it; you simply cut yourself off from something and therefore possibly make yourself, in many ways, less powerful, rather than more powerful.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I gently remind the House that people who wish to take part in the exchanges should have been here at the start and remained throughout? People who have gone in and out of the Chamber, and may have come back in again, should not then be standing. That is very much in breach of the traditions of the House, and we need to be clear about that.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): One of the bogeymen policies for me was closer political union. If this country votes to stay in the EU on 23 June, what guarantees has the Prime Minister got that these things will be put in statute or written into a treaty at that time?

The Prime Minister: First, this is already an agreement and it will shortly be deposited at the UN as an international law decision. Therefore, it will already by then be legally binding and irreversible. Getting out of ever closer union, and indeed redefining closer union, is so important that I think it needs to go in the treaties, and the agreement here is that when the treaties next change, that will be written into those treaties. We have a double lock on this, a vital point.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I suggest that this is tinkering; it is certainly not fundamental change. The red card is not a veto; it will not stop the majority of the EU forcing unwanted taxes and regulations on this country. May I put it to the Prime Minister that he should at least accept the possibility that the red card could be turned against us, in that UK-sponsored initiatives could be blocked by the majority of the EU—initiatives that could be in our best interests, such as access and further enhancement of the single market?

The Prime Minister: I do not overstate the red card. It is a new mechanism, not to delay but to properly block initiatives, that is available to national Parliaments should they want to avail themselves of it. To me, this is about another thing that makes this organisation more democratically accountable to national Parliaments. If my hon. Friend is saying that, on some occasions, that might work against us because other national Parliaments might want to stop something on which we were keen, I have to say that I suppose that that is accountability and democracy. The point is that, because of my decision, this organisation will be more democratic rather than less democratic.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): As the Prime Minister seems to be getting “nul points” from his own side for these European renegotiations, may I commend him for coming round to Chancellor Merkel’s view on freedom of movement? On freedom of movement, will he assure the House that there will be absolutely no implications from this deal for the hundreds of thousands of UK citizens living in the EU?

The Prime Minister: Of course if we stay in the European Union, British people will continue to be able to work abroad, live abroad and retire abroad, as they do now. It is not for me to set out what would happen to them in different circumstances. I think the leave campaign will want to try to address that point, but people know with certainty what they will get if the remain side wins.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): In his statement, the Prime Minister observed that leaving the EU might briefly make us feel more sovereign. Does he not accept that for many hon. Members, the issue of parliamentary sovereignty will be the central one of the debate in which we are about to engage—namely, that so long as we are subject to the fiat of the European Commission and the European Court of Justice, we will not be truly sovereign, and that very little changed last weekend in that respect?

The Prime Minister: What changed last weekend in that respect is that because we are getting out of ever closer union, we now know that we cannot be forced into further political union against our will; that is very important. On this issue of sovereignty, let me repeat that,
if we leave the EU, we might feel more sovereign, because we could pass this law or that law, but if we still want to sell into Europe, we have to meet all the rules over which we will have no say. To me, that is a diminution of sovereignty rather than an increase of sovereignty.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On the issue of sovereignty, it has been reported by several news media organisations that the Prime Minister intends to unveil a British sovereignty Bill in the next few days. Will he confirm that is the case? If it is, will he tell us what provision he will make in that Bill to recognise that the principle of unlimited sovereignty of Parliament is a distinctively English principle that has no counterpart in Scottish constitutional law?

The Prime Minister: What I have said we should do is to build on what we did in 2011 when we set out that Parliament is sovereign, and just as Parliament can choose to join the EU, it can also choose to leave the EU. That is good for the whole of the United Kingdom. We do have a sovereign Parliament. There are ways that we can add to that, as other countries have done, and I look forward to bringing forward some proposals in the coming days.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On Friday, 2,500 people packed the QEII Centre to see GO launch the national cross-party leave campaign. Among the speakers were two UK Independence party MEPs, a renowned economic commentator, a senior trade unionist, a much respected Labour MP, the co-chairman of Conservatives for Britain, four Conservative MPs, and the leader of Respect. In 2014, Ruth Davidson, our excellent Conservative leader in Scotland, linked arms with George Galloway in the national interest. Does the Prime Minister agree that Ruth Davidson was right and that sometimes we have to work with people we do not like?

The Prime Minister: Everyone will have to make the choice about what platform they appear on and whom they appear with. I think that the disadvantage of appearing on any platform with either Nigel Farage or George Galloway arises when considering who their friends are, whom they support and the overseas politicians whom they seem to support. Everyone will have to think carefully about whom they want to appear with.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): There has been a lot of talk, quite rightly, about the City of London and big multinational companies working here and investing in this country, but the beating heart of our economy is the small and medium-sized enterprise sector. Some 39% of SMEs in this country export to EU countries, so does the Prime Minister agree that it would be madness to slam the door in their face?

The Prime Minister: I think the overwhelming majority of SMEs that export support the case that I am making. Many companies that are not exporters are involved in the supply chain with companies that do export. That is a point that many business service organisations, banks, accountants and lawyers are very well placed to make.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I, too, thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and all right hon. and hon. Members who voted to have a referendum on EU membership. Will the Prime Minister say whether the agreement that he has reached alters the Lisbon treaty?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, it does. When we change these treaties, this will be, as it were, one of the founding documents of the EU, so the international law agreement, and then in time the treaty changes, will sit alongside other treaties that have been produced in the past. Like my hon. Friend, I regret that so many treaties were made with so little democratic accountability, and I think we are putting that right in two ways: first, with things such as getting out of ever closer union—a distant dream for many of us who used to argue for that but never got it—and secondly, through the democratic accountability of holding a referendum.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Prime Minister has stated explicitly that people who vote to leave the European Union do not love their country. I represent many veterans of the armed services whose patriotism cannot be questioned. Will the Prime Minister apologise to those people?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely did not say that. What I said was that I loved my country, and I think that our country—an amazing country—will be greater and more powerful if we remain in organisations through which we can project our power and influence, and do great things in the world. I do not question the patriotism of anyone in our country—we are all going to have to make a choice—but I believe that Britain’s greatness is not simply the parliamentary democracy that we enjoy and the rights that we have in this country. We are an outward-looking country, and I am proud of the fact that we help, whether with Syrian refugees, chasing down pirates off the Somali coast, or trying to stabilise countries from which many problems come. We can do that, yes, because we are strong; yes, because we have great defence; but also because we are members of NATO, we have a permanent seat at the UN, and we are part of the EU. I think it is technical jargon to call it a force multiplier, but that is what it is, and we should be proud of the role we play in the world.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My right hon. Friend always made it clear that if these negotiations did not succeed he would have no hesitation in recommending that we leave the European Union. Will he place in the Library the papers that cover the contingency plans that would have been used in that eventuality, and will he confirm that in that circumstance he would have had to make the very leap in the dark that he is now vitilifying?

The Prime Minister: I have great respect for my hon. Friend, as he has held his views for many years, and believes that Britain would be better off outside the EU. I hope that he respects my views. I have always believed that if we can get reform we are better off in the EU, and that is what I said.

As for the documentation, we will publish something about the alternatives to demonstrate what we believe they are and to demonstrate that we are thinking about what would need to happen if that eventuality came about. As for what we achieved, I am happy to write to my hon. Friend with a list of the things that we said in our manifesto and that we achieved in the renegotiation. I quite accept that colleagues are going to say, “I am going to take a different path from you. I am going to make my own decision.” What I do not accept, however, is that somehow we have not delivered the overwhelming majority of what we promised to the British people at the election.
Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister tell the House whether he thinks rural communities in Britain would be better or worse off in the EU?

The Prime Minister: I represent a rural community—400 square miles of beautiful west Oxfordshire. There will be a range of views in my constituency, but I know when I talk to many of those who are responsible for producing food and for looking after our local environment that they see strong advantages from remaining in the European Union.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that negotiating a special status deal, which he has done, is a demonstration of sovereignty at its best, because he is promoting this country’s interests in a rigorous way, ensuring that we are stronger, safer and more economically prosperous, and that that manifests itself in many aspects of the deal and in the way that we will behave as a nation state within the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful for what my hon. Friend says. I think it demonstrates that although that organisation is imperfect and sometimes can be inflexible, it did show flexibility. One country came along with a manifesto pledge to renegotiate its position and a set of changes that it wanted to achieve, and by and large we have achieved them. That is a sign that the organisation can be flexible, which is incredibly important. If we had not been able to achieve any of this, I would have had deep questions about whether we could stay in such an organisation, but it has demonstrated flexibility and that is all to the good.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): As many Members know, I am fiercely proud of Northern Ireland and its place in the world as a global trader, and I know we benefit a great deal from the EU. Will the Prime Minister make clear the benefits to us on our borders and for our farmers, our fishermen and all the people who rely on international trade?

The Prime Minister: I look forward to coming to Northern Ireland to make exactly those points. When we look at the special status that Northern Ireland has been given in terms of vital grants, the important co-operation as part of the common travel area with the Republic, and the way we have already reformed the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, it is clear that there is more to be done, but money goes into Northern Ireland through those programmes. I am happy to talk about all those things in the Province.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): The Prime Minister referred to resolving the issue for a generation. Will a treaty change to incorporate our changes and perhaps to allow greater integration of the eurozone require a further referendum in the UK?

The Prime Minister: That is a very good question. It would depend on what was in that treaty. If the eurozone members were to bring forward treaty changes to change the nature of the eurozone, but without in any way affecting competencies here in Britain, I suspect we would be able to get our changes on ever closer union and on the governance surrounding the eurozone into that treaty. Whether or not such a treaty change requires a referendum simply depends on whether it passes competencies from Britain to Brussels. If the answer is yes, we have to have a referendum; if the answer is no, we do not.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): In his statement the Prime Minister said, “Responsibility for supervising the financial stability of the UK will always remain in the hands of the Bank of England”, but we already share that responsibility with the European Banking Authority and we are already signed up to the single rulebook of that authority. How is the Prime Minister’s statement compatible with the view of Mr Andrea Enria, the head of the European Banking Authority, who says that that institution must be the dominant player in setting rules, particularly if Britain wishes to keep the pound and stay within a single European financial regulation?

The Prime Minister: The answer to that question required something like 35 hours of negotiation because it is so important. Let me try to précis it. Of course there are the banking union arrangements, and the eurozone countries need to have their banks properly scrutinised and regulated at a European level. We have our own currency and our own banking supervision arrangements. In trying to supervise a complex, large economy such as Britain, which has one of the largest financial centres anywhere in the world, not just banks but other financial institutions such as central counterparties are systemically important. That is so important because ultimately we need to make sure that whatever the eurozone does, we are protected by the Bank of England playing the role and being able to intervene to resolve and to supervise those systemically important institutions. That is what paragraph 4 is about.

Although that sounds very technical, at its heart is actually something fantastically important: if Britain—fifth largest economy in the world, important financial centre—cannot have fair rules in an organisation where the euro is obviously a very large currency, there really would be a case for saying, “Hold on a second. This is a single currency-only organisation. We’d better leave.” So it was absolutely crucial to get it settled—technical but, in the end, fundamentally important—whether we can get fair treatment inside this organisation, and the answer is yes we can.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): This great exercise in democracy is not about what we say in this House, but about what our constituents decide, and my constituents, like many others, will be interested in the things that affect them: the economic protection and the jobs that the new reformed EU and the single trade zone can bring. They do not want the euro; they do not want the Euro superstate and they do not want something for nothing in welfare. Will the Prime Minister confirm for my constituents and for constituents across the country that that is what he has negotiated and that that is why it would be wrong to take a leap in the dark?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to make that point. I do not know whether I will make it to Wimbledon, but I hope to make it to many parts of our country over the next four months to make exactly that point. We have not solved all of Britain’s problems with Europe—we
have not solved all of Europe’s problems—but we have fundamentally addressed four major problems: too much of a single currency club, too much regulation, too much of a political union and not enough national determination over free-movement abuse and welfare. Those four things go to the heart of the problems we have had with this organisation.

Mr Speaker: As the Prime Minister knows very well, it is always worth while going to Wimbledon.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Prime Minister welcome the support he has received today, surprisingly, from the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, who has joined his campaign and who supports it, or will he encourage the people of Northern Ireland to stay in tune with his Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who has indicated very strongly, in tune with them, that they should leave? If he is not going to support his Secretary of State, will he, then, follow the Deputy First Minister’s advice that she should resign? Will he now support his Secretary of State?

The Prime Minister: The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland does an excellent job. She is exercising her ability to reach a personal decision and to campaign for Britain to leave the EU, and it is absolutely right she is able to do that. The key thing is that everyone in Northern Ireland should make up their own mind based on the evidence, and I look forward to coming to try to help persuade them to remain in a reformed EU.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does the Prime Minister accept that the thousands of my constituents, the hundreds of thousands of constituents in London and the millions of constituents across the UK who work in financial services will be glad that he, at least, values their jobs, even if the Leader of the Opposition appears to dismiss them? Will he also recognise that the economic governance package is an important win for a strategic British interest and, therefore, that the pragmatic and businesslike thing is not to walk away from a market we are in, but to stay in it, improve it and make it work better?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree with that. We should recognise that there are something like a million jobs in finance in Glasgow and Edinburgh—I think there are almost a million jobs in Manchester and Birmingham. The key point here is this: because we are in the single market, we have the right to passport—that is, to have a bank or a financial services company here in Britain that can trade throughout the EU. Leave the single market, and you lose that right. What then have to happen is that companies based in the UK would have to move at least some of their jobs to another European country—that is why HSBC said the other day they would lose 1,000 jobs. So real jobs, real people’s salaries and real prosperity are under threat. We really need to explain this. It is complicated, but there is no doubt in my mind: leaving the single market for financial services would mean fewer jobs in Britain.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It was interesting to hear the Prime Minister use the word “divorce” in connection with some of the less than helpful comments from the Mayor of London. I think we are all now fully aware that hell hath no fury like a Bullingdon boy scorned. I will be voting to stay in the European Union, and I will help the Prime Minister to convince others. However, if he has had such a good deal, why is he struggling to convince so many in his own party?

The Prime Minister: Some people have very long-standing views about wanting to leave the EU. The point I was making about starting divorce proceedings on the basis of renewing the wedding vows is that that is what some people seem to be suggesting, not just the Mayor of London but others—that somehow starting the process of leaving will mean being offered a better deal to stay. I think that is just not the case. We could think about it like this: divorcing not just one person but 27 potentially unhappy partners. While I yield to no one in my belief that I can bring people back, I have seen multiple weddings take place but I have never seen multiple divorce negotiations resulting in a multiple wedding—that would be something!

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): May I join other Members in congratulating the Prime Minister and the Minister for Europe on their sterling work in Brussels last week? I agree that this reform produces a fundamental change in British-EU relations, at least in my living memory. Speaking as someone who started out on my career in 2008, at the beginning of the great recession, the possibility of entering into new turmoil within the economy fills an awful lot of young people with dread. That is why I will be joining the Prime Minister on the in campaign. Does he agree that it is absolutely vital for Britain’s economic security that we remain inside the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I very much hope that young people will have a very strong voice in this campaign, because, as my hon. Friend says, we have been through difficult economic times, and at a time of uncertainty, why add extra risk?

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Prime Minister agree with me and with London’s Mayor, who said two weeks ago that “it is in Britain’s geo-strategic interests to be pretty intimately engaged in the doings of a continent that has a grim 20th-century history, and whose agonies have caused millions of Britons to lose their lives”, and that the best way of staying “pretty intimately engaged” is to remain a member of the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I do agree with that. As I have said, if we leave the EU, it does not cease to exist, but it would continue to have an impact on our lives and on our world, so the best thing to do is to try to alter it from within.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will try to accommodate remaining colleagues, but short questions are now required. We are having pithy answers but we need short questions.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): As someone who has an open mind and can see competing arguments on both sides, may I ask that we ensure that the information used in the campaign is factually correct? A few weeks ago, a letter criticising the Prime Minister appeared in The Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail, apparently signed by a local Conservative activist from
my constituency, linking the association to the letter, yet no one had ever heard of that person. May I ask that information put forward by both sides is fair, accurate and factually correct so that the British public can decide on the basis of fair evidence?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are producing a series of documents and we must make sure that the information is accurate.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Prime Minister reiterate what is surely at the heart of this matter—that if the UK left the EU, we would almost certainly end up having to continue to implement the vast majority of EU rules and regulations if we wanted to access, on the same sort of terms, the single market, and the only difference would be that we would no longer get a say in those terms?

The Prime Minister: I think that is right. I have had a lot of conversations with the Norwegian Prime Minister about this. Of course, you do not have to opt for the Norwegian option, but if you do, you implement the directives but have no say over how they are put in place.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): For the first time in my lifetime, people in Worcester will be able to have a genuine say on this issue. I thank the Prime Minister for that fact, and also for the huge effort that he has put into negotiating Britain’s corner in Europe. In the 2010 election manifesto on which he was made Prime Minister and I came to this House, we said that we would bring in a UK sovereignty Bill to assert the sovereignty of our country and make sure that this Parliament took final decisions. Does he agree that sovereignty can be asserted by this House and is not just something for us to argue over?

The Prime Minister: We introduced a sovereignty clause in the referendum provisions of the European Union Act 2011, and I am looking at enhancing that and adding it to the proposals that will come forward.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Given that so many of my constituents work in the City of London, I welcome what the Prime Minister has said about making sure that we have a strong global financial centre that enjoys all the benefits of access to the largest single market. Given that, may I offer the Prime Minister a once-in-a-Parliament opportunity to campaign in my constituency on this issue? Given that there are those in Frankfurt and Dublin who would love to get their hands on Britain’s financial services, and that the Mayor of London has given up his day job to think about his next job, may I also ask the Prime Minister to send a very clear message to my constituents and all Londoners that London is stronger in Europe?

The Prime Minister: I would be delighted to come to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and to case the joint fact, not the politicians’ choice.

The City is Europe’s financial centre and the UK’s membership of the European Union (EU) is of strategic importance to the financial and related professional services industry. Business opinion both within and beyond our industry is that continuing membership is important to Britain’s competitiveness:

Business organisations covering finance, insurance, manufacturing and engineering are all making their views clear, and I think we should listen to them.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that since 2010 unemployment has fallen by 50% in my constituency, that investment in the black country has gone up and that the west midlands economy is growing. Does he agree that full access to the single market, which focuses on jobs and growth, is critical for the security and jobs of people in my constituency and across the west midlands?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have seen an industrial renaissance in the west midlands, with more people in work and with growth, particularly in the automotive sector. Such sectors are a part of complex supply chains right across Europe and it would be a huge dislocation if we were to leave.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Access to labour and the protection of workers’ rights and of human rights are just some of the benefits of our membership of the EU; they are beneficial for our workers, businesses and citizens. It must perturb the Prime Minister, therefore, that his Justice Secretary, Work and Pensions Secretary and Minister for Employment are poster boys and girls for the out campaign. How will he ensure that those positive reasons for remaining are at the forefront of this campaign?

The Prime Minister: We are dealing with an issue that has caused divisions and differences within parties right across this House. Twenty-three of the people who sit around the Cabinet table are very much convinced that we should be better off in the EU, and six take a different view. I do not think we should be concerned about that. This is a referendum—it is the people’s choice, not the politicians’ choice.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that now is the time for realpolitik? We are no longer an imperial power able to demand what we want and get it. We live in a fragile and increasingly volatile world in all senses of those terms. Does not our membership of the EU, together with our seat on the Security Council of the United Nations, our membership of NATO and our position at the head of the Commonwealth, provide an ideal platform for us to promote Britain both here and abroad? That is why we should stay in.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Membership of those organisations helps us not only to get things done for our people and our country, but to make progress on the issues we care about around the world.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Prime Minister deserves credit for the deal he has got; I will be able to campaign for it with confidence. He is right to say that the three different leave campaigns are unable to say what leave would really look like, but given that he will have to do the negotiations in the event of an out vote, it is also incumbent on him to tell us what leave would
look like. When he sets out the alternatives, will he explain specifically what leave, as well as stay, would look like?

The Prime Minister: We will, as a Government, set out what we believe the alternatives are. There is the Swiss model, which took nine years to negotiate, and we have discussed the Norwegian model today. The World Trade Organisation option means that we could face tariffs every time we try to sell a car into the EU. The Canada free trade deal has not yet been agreed, but it does not cover all services so we could be seriously disadvantaged. We need to go into detail on each of those and put accurate information in place so that people can see what is on offer.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that critical to the success of his campaign will be his ability to convince people that, by giving up some sovereignty in Britain, we have gained sovereignty and authority in Europe?

The Prime Minister: Clearly, that is going to be the challenge of the coming months. As I have said, I have no selfish interest in this; I will just tell it as I see it. As I have learned over six years of being Prime Minister, this organisation is imperfect and can sometimes be frustrating, but we are better off in it. I profoundly believe that and I will take that message around the country.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): People in Scotland are entitled to hear the clear and positive case for remaining in the EU, and to make their decisions on the basis of hearing all the arguments in full. The Prime Minister spoke today about the importance of taking account of the express will of the people. Will he undertake to take full account of the express view of the Scottish people and ensure that if we vote to remain, we are not removed from the EU against our will?

The Prime Minister: I very much look forward to taking this message to Scotland and campaigning in Scotland. I enjoyed doing that during the independence referendum, and I look forward to making the argument again that we are better off together. It is a one United Kingdom decision.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): The out voices have been dominant for a long time. If my right hon. Friend had come back as emperor of Europe, they would have complained that it was an idea from Rome. The biggest questions that I have been asked by my constituents are: what are the positives, and what should we be voting on? I urge my right hon. Friend to speak in this campaign about the positives to the economy, to security and to the military, and to make the point that nothing can be more sovereign than 46 million people having their say.

The Prime Minister: Absolutely right. We should talk not only about the conceptual benefits of free trade and open markets, but about the simple and practical benefits. We are free to travel, work, live and retire anywhere in Europe. Because of open skies, the price of going on holiday and taking a flight anywhere in Europe has come down by something like 40%. When you travel, you will hopefully soon be able to access your digital content on your iPad, so that you can watch whatever you are watching wherever you are in Europe. [ Interruption. ] I think I have been doing this for too long, but you get the point.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Many of my constituents are somewhat nonplussed about the EU question, but they are hugely concerned about the future of the UK steel industry. Does the Prime Minister believe that the UK steel industry will have a brighter future if we remain in Europe or if we leave?

The Prime Minister: That is a very important point. There are huge challenges not just in our steel industry but right across Europe, and that is increasingly being talked about around the European Council table. However difficult it is—and it is difficult—I think we have a better chance of dealing with Chinese overcapacity, dumping and all the rest of it if we work as the biggest market in the world of 500 million people. Of course, we can get some things done as the fifth largest economy talking to China, but as part of 500 million, I think we can get more action.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): The number of unemployed claimants in my constituency has fallen by 80% since 2010. Does the Prime Minister agree that to leave the EU now, at a time of economic global uncertainty, would risk a reversal of the progress that has been made?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted with the unemployment performance in my hon. Friend’s constituency. There is a simple point here: we live in uncertain times. We have made good progress on the economy. We should try to take the risks away from that economic performance, and clearly changing our status in such a radical way would be a risk.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): We have been enriched by freedom of movement, we have been made safer by co-operation and we remain relevant in global terms because of our seat in the European Union. All of that and more is, unfortunately, now at risk. With that in mind, will the Prime Minister put some punch into a positive fight to remain in Europe? Would it not be ironic if this Conservative Prime Minister left it to the Scottish National party to save Britain from itself?

The Prime Minister: I hope I have demonstrated today that there is plenty of punch in this campaign, and it will be positive, too. I make no apology for saying that in making a positive campaign about jobs, about business and about competitiveness, we should also examine the alternatives. There is absolutely nothing wrong with doing that.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): As a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I have seen NATO operations around the world, including Operation Ocean Shield against Somali pirates. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is the 28 member nations of NATO—including non-EU countries such as Norway, Turkey, Iceland, the United States and Canada—that are delivering our international security, not an EU army?
The Prime Minister: We do not want an EU army, and the document clearly says that our national security is a reserved matter for nation states. It puts that beyond doubt. When you look in detail at what, for instance, both NATO and the EU are doing off the coast of Somalia, or at what is happening in the Mediterranean with NATO in the east and the EU in the south, you see that we need to be in both organisations. You do not just talk about one organisation while you are in that organisation; you address NATO questions when you are sitting around the table with other EU leaders.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The UK’s membership of the EU has been a force for good for trade, jobs, investment and international co-operation. As the Prime Minister has recognised, the EU is a fundamental part of the architecture that has promoted prosperity and kept the peace in Europe after the ravages of two world wars. Does he agree that those who are campaigning so aggressively to reject his renegotiations and cut Britain loose in the modern world are on the wrong side not only of the big arguments but of history?

The Prime Minister: How best to engage in Europe has always been a challenge for our country. There is a strong case for saying that when we have tried to cut ourselves off, it has ended in disaster and the need to re-engage. We should always work to get our engagement right, which is what this deal is all about.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): There is nobody in this House more Eurosceptic than myself, but I am standing at the side of the Prime Minister on this one, because the Prime Minister has always stood by me and my people in Morecambe. In my constituency, we have the port of Heysham, through which 10% of our GDP passes, most of it from Northern Ireland. We also have two EDF nuclear power stations, which are sponsored by the French Government. I do not want jobs to be lost in my constituency, especially as its unemployment rate is the lowest it has been for generations. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree with me on that synopsis?

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree that this is about jobs and about livelihoods. My hon. Friend stands up very well for his constituents. I remember visiting not that long ago, when we looked at the Heysham link road. I even hammered a rivet into one vital bridge; I just hope it survives.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): The Prime Minister indicated in the House on 3 February and today that a series of documents would be published in relation to the reform proposals. On 3 February, he referred to the impact of an exit on the free movement of people within Ireland—in particular, the removal of that free movement. Will he confirm when those documents will be made available to enable us, as people who want to remain in the EU, to have a full, robust and earnest discussion?

The Prime Minister: I do not have the dates for the hon. Lady of when those documents will be published, but I will try to make sure that when we look at alternatives and consequences, we address the question of the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland, and the issue of movement of people that could be triggered by that.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): One word that seemed to crop up around the reporting of the summit was “contagion”, as though other states following the Prime Minister’s lead would be a bad thing. Does the Prime Minister agree that contagion could be a good thing and that we should encourage it? The one-size-fits-all Europe of the 1970s and 1980s is a thing of the past, and the recognition of more than one currency is a good example of that. We have taken a lead that has set reform in train.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right. Europe will never work if we try to make everyone be one-size-fits-all. If a country such as Britain raises concerns, it is right that they are addressed, and I am glad that they have been.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Approximately 30,000 of the UK citizens living in the European Union whom my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) referred to—interestingly, we call them expats rather than economic migrants—claim benefits in the European Union countries in which they live. How will the package that the Prime Minister has negotiated affect them?

The Prime Minister: What we have negotiated is a welfare mechanism that the European Commission has said applies to Britain now, so we are able to pull this emergency brake and restrict benefits for seven years. It is for other countries to determine whether they qualify and whether they are able to do that, but I am in no doubt that it applies right away in the UK, which is what I was determined to secure.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that we have trading partners and military allies outside the EU. Has he had any representations from those allies and trading partners about whether they see us as being better in the EU or outside?

The Prime Minister: I would say that in all the conversations I have had with our partners, our neighbours and countries around the world that look to us as friends, I have been quite surprised by just how unanimous and how passionate they have been. I would totally disabuse people of the idea that, for instance, there is any sense that some of the countries of the Commonwealth might want Britain to step back from Europe and form some sort of new relationship with them. The Prime Ministers of New Zealand, Canada and Australia, and the President of America, could not be clearer in thinking that Britain should stay in a reformed European Union, and in that way make sure that Europe is looking out to them and signing trade deals with them, which is exactly what we should do.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): While the referendum campaign is in progress in the United Kingdom, Europe will continue to host and witness the worst humanitarian crisis we have seen in the past 70 years. Last summer, shameful attempts were made in the media and elsewhere to link that crisis to our membership of the European Union. Will the Prime Minister give us an assurance that whatever happens in the Mediterranean over the
next three months, the United Kingdom’s response will be based solely on humanitarian necessity and will not be influenced by how it might impact on the referendum campaign.

**The Prime Minister:** Of course, we will do what is right. In the context of our membership, it is important to address the issue of migration. I would make a number of points. First, we are obviously outside Schengen and will remain outside Schengen, so people coming to the EU do not have an automatic right to come to Britain. Secondly, I would make the point that we are doing a very responsible thing in taking refugees directly from the region. Thirdly, we are working with our European partners to secure the external border. At the end of the day, whether we are in the EU or out of the EU, we are affected by this problem in Europe, so we should be working with our partners to make sure that they can better control, and in some cases stop, the flow of people to Europe.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): Some argue that we will be able to forge better deals across the world by leaving the European Union, but in the three years that I have been a trade envoy I have not yet met a single representative of any of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations that believes our trade and investment prospects would be better if we left the EU. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that the referendum is not about whether we should do business with Europe or with the rest of the world, but about the fact that we should and must do business with both, as we are, and that those with whom we most want a free trade agreement will always prioritise the EU?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend puts it in absolutely the right way. It is not an either/or. We are expanding our trade in south-east Asia—we have doubled our trade with China since I became Prime Minister—but I am struck, as he is, by the fact that countries are not saying, “Get out of the EU and sign a trade deal with us”. They are saying, “Stick in the EU and make sure it signs a trade deal, because it will be bigger and it will be better.”

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Prime Minister articulates the case in the national interest well. However, I have heard unconfirmed rumours that he has been exploiting the situation among Conservative Members for his own self-interest by opening a private book on his successor. Will the Prime Minister confirm that? Will he give us an inkling of where the money is flowing, and will he guarantee to extend the syndicate to the rest of us?

**The Prime Minister:** My father, whom I miss every day, was an inveterate gambler. I remember nothing so much as sitting with him on a Saturday and watching him bet on race after race. While I enjoyed all that, I have tried to stick away from it myself, so I am not running a book. All I know is that I will do the right thing for this country, and the right thing for this country is to remain in a reformed EU.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): Moody’s has today warned that it could cut Britain’s credit rating in the event of Brexit. It justifies that thus: “Unless the UK managed to negotiate a new trade arrangement with the EU that preserves at least some of the trade benefits of EU membership, the UK’s exports would suffer. It would likely lead to a prolonged period of uncertainty, which would negatively affect investment.” Is that project fear or a warning from the real world?

**The Prime Minister:** There are important economic consequences that we need to lay out so that people can see the potential downsides of what I think is a leap in the dark. We have set out a lot this afternoon about how long it would take to put trade deals in place and about how damaging that could be. It would be irresponsible not to be put in front of the British people the consequences of the outcomes.

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): There is one deal the Prime Minister has always had control over, which is the disbursement of common agricultural policy payments to farmers. Will he pledge to pass on the €187 million convergence uplift that the EU has provided to the UK? It is actually based on the payments that Scottish farmers receive, which are the lowest in Europe. That would make it much easier to campaign in Scotland with farmers.

**The Prime Minister:** I will look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman says. My memory of the CAP deal—the finance deal and its consequences—is that we actually gave the devolved Administrations a huge amount of leeway to determine the right way to spend their money. I think farmers actually benefit from the way in which this is done, but I will look carefully at the point he makes.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for all his work on behalf of our country over the past weeks, months and, indeed, years?

Exports to China from Germany, France and the UK have all shown significant increases. Does that not show that the opportunities for trade outside the EU are not, as some would have it, constrained by membership of the EU?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. You do not expand your trade with China by doing less trade with the EU. We want to do both.

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): Last year, every colleague on the Government side of the House stood successfully under the leadership of my right hon. Friend and under the one nation Conservative team banner. Does the Prime Minister agree that whatever the views of Conservative Members—I am fully supportive of him—and whatever the outcome of the European Union referendum, we must unify once again as a party to ensure that whoever leads our party into the 2020 election does not accidentally allow Jeremy Corbyn and his Labour colleagues into government?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree. This is always going to be a difficult process. In the Labour party, as well as in the Conservative party, there are people on both sides of the debate. However, this is such a big question—one that will ultimately be answered by the people, rather than by politicians—that we should all be big enough to have an honest and open, but polite disagreement, and then come back together again afterwards.
Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): May I take the Prime Minister back to another election commitment? In 2014, he and I, along with thousands of Conservative activists, campaigned on a promise, which was emblazoned across our leaflets, to restore control of our borders. The Prime Minister followed that up in the same year, saying that “I will go to Brussels, I will not take no for an answer and when it comes to free movement: I will get what Britain needs.” What changed last week?

The Prime Minister: What changed last week is that we are reforming free movement to make sure that we can keep out fraudsters, criminals and those peddling sham marriages, and to make sure that we can apply British rules to foreign nationals coming in as European citizens, just as we do to our own citizens. There are a whole set of changes. To be fair to the Home Secretary, she negotiated incredibly hard, knowing that this was the one moment in which we had the ability to make these changes—reversing European Court of Justice judgments—and to reform free movement, and that is exactly what we have done.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I first thank my right hon. Friend for the referendum? He and I fundamentally disagree, as he knows. My concern is about immigration, which he said he would contain. We have net migration to this country of about 240,000 every year at the moment. In three years—I repeat, every three years—that is between 700,000 or 750,000, which is the size of the city of Leeds. Surely that is unsustainable. What he has negotiated will not prevent that from happening.

The Prime Minister: Where I agree with my hon. Friend is that we have got to do more to control immigration. Net migration to the UK is now made up roughly half and half of those from outside the EU—there is still more we need to do to shut down the bogus colleges and to make sure that people are not coming in unfairly—and those from within the EU, where one of the most important things we can do is to withdraw the artificial draw of additional welfare payments. The fact that people can get £10,000 in the first year they come to this country is surely an important determining factor. I am convinced that, with the correct measures, we can get immigration down while remaining a member of the European Union.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): During the general election, it was reported that the Prime Minister had expressed some concern about the BBC’s coverage of the election and its impartiality. What assurances can he give me, so that I can relay them to my constituents, that the BBC will not abuse its position again?

The Prime Minister: Politicians complaining about the BBC is a pretty common activity. I remember the former First Minister of Scotland getting quite heated about this issue. Every media organisation is under an obligation—sorry, let me restate that, because it is certainly not true of the newspapers. Every regulated television business is under a duty of impartiality, and I am sure the BBC will carry that out.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Prime Minister, other colleagues and, indeed, all 103 Back Benchers who have taken part in this important exchange.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have made the office of the Minister for Community and Social Care aware of my intention to make this point of order, as well as your good office. Last week, after much delay, the long-awaited report by the Mental Health Taskforce, which was commissioned by NHS England, was published. On the same day, the Government made a series of apparent announcements to the media in response to the report—a courtesy that is yet to be afforded to this House.

This is a vital moment for mental health in England, so it is highly regrettable that the report was published during a recess, preventing Members from all parts of the House from scrutinising its findings and questioning the Government’s response to it. Will you advise me, Mr Speaker, of whether you have received any indication from Ministers that they intend to make a statement on the Mental Health Taskforce report and allow Members the opportunity to question the Government on the announcements they have made?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for her courtesy in giving me notice of it. The short answer to the last part of her point of order is no. I have received no indication that a Minister intends to make a statement on the matter. What I would say provisionally, having learned of this matter only a small number of moments ago, is that significant announcements of changes of policy should be made first to the House. That means, save in cases of emergency, that they should be made to the House while it is sitting. Of course, right hon. and hon. Members and others can and do access reports whether or not the House is sitting and may pursue their contents in debate and in questions. I will cause further inquiries to be made on the content and timing of this particular announcement.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) may inadvertently have misled the House when referring to parliamentary sovereignty and its effect across the United Kingdom. Specifically, I seek your guidance on how we can put it on the record that parliamentary sovereignty, according to Diceyan jurisprudence, applies equally in Scotland and England, notwithstanding the 1953 MacCormick case, which was obiter dicta of course?

Mr Speaker: I say two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, I say very gently—I am trying to be kind to him because he is a new Member, albeit an extremely distinguished fellow—that if he wants to raise points of order and argue the toss about the proprieties of parliamentary procedure, perhaps he might learn that he should refer to the Leader of the Opposition as the Leader of the Opposition, not call him by name. People have to be careful that they are on sound ground if they start playing the procedural card.

Secondly, I say very kindly to the hon. Gentleman, whose intellect and eloquence are evident to all, not least to the hon. Gentleman himself, that this does not seem to be a point of order. It is an argument, albeit a cerebral and doubtless high-minded argument, between opposing lawyers. We will leave it there for now.
Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill

Second Reading

6.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill gives effect to key elements of the fresh start agreement of 2015 and the Stormont House agreement of 2014. It is an important stage in the implementation of those agreements, which, taken together, have the potential to help us secure a more peaceful, stable and prosperous future for Northern Ireland.

Before turning to the detail of the clauses, I will remind the House of the background to their contents. As the House will recall, following just over 10 weeks of intensive talks, the Government, the Northern Ireland Executive parties and the Irish Government reached the Stormont House agreement on 23 December 2014. It addressed many of the most significant challenges facing Northern Ireland. Some of those challenges, such as the long-standing disagreements over flags, parading and the past, were deeply damaging to political relationships within the devolved Executive and were fuelling community divisions. Others, particularly the state of the Executive’s finances and disagreements over welfare reform, were jeopardising the effectiveness and sustainability of devolution itself.

The Stormont House agreement included proposals to give the Executive a workable and sustainable budget; to set a path towards resolving contentious issues around flags, symbols and parading; to establish new bodies to help to tackle the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past; and to deliver reforms at Stormont to make devolution work better. All of that was underpinned by a financial package that gave the Executive about £2 billion of extra spending power.

The Stormont House agreement was and remains a good deal for Northern Ireland. However, by last summer, it was clear that implementation had stalled. That was largely due to disagreements in the Executive over the budget and finances, at the heart of which was the decision by the nationalist parties to withdraw their support for the welfare reform package agreed at Stormont Castle the preceding December. As the stand-off continued, it had the knock-on effect of preventing decisions on other elements of the agreement from being taken. Sadly, the sense of crisis was intensified by two brutal murders in Belfast, one in May and one in August, which once again raised the spectre of the malign influence of continued paramilitary activity on the streets of Northern Ireland.

As we entered last autumn, the political situation looked increasingly perilous. We faced the prospect that resignations might trigger early Assembly elections. That could easily have led to the collapse of the devolved institutions and a return to direct rule from Westminster. That would have been a major setback after all that has been achieved under successive Governments during the past 20 years. It was an outcome that the Government acted strenuously and decisively to avoid.

First, in a speech in Cambridge on 5 September, I made it clear that we could not let the financial impasse continue indefinitely and that if there was no resolution to the dispute, we would be left with no option but to legislate in Westminster for welfare reform.

Secondly, following discussions with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, it was decided that the time was right to convene a second round of cross-party talks, which began at Stormont House on 8 September. Once again, the talks included the five largest parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Irish Government on matters for which they are responsible, in accordance with the long-established three-stranded approach to Northern Ireland affairs. The objectives we set ourselves were twofold: to secure the full implementation of the Stormont House agreement and to deal with the impact of continued paramilitary activity.

The talks once again lasted for 10 weeks and concluded on 17 November with a document entitled “A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan”, which was agreed between the UK Government, the Irish Government and the two parties representing a majority of Unionists and nationalists in the Executive. In the Government’s view, that agreement goes a long way towards satisfying the objectives that the participants in the talks set themselves. It gives the Executive a stable and sustainable budget that includes welfare reform; it unblocks progress on other crucial elements of the Stormont House agreement, including institutional reform; and it strongly reaffirms support for the rule of law and places fresh obligations on Northern Ireland’s political representatives to work together with determination to rid society of paramilitary activity and groups. This agreement, like the previous one, was underpinned by a financial package from the UK Government, this time worth up to £500 million.

I can inform the House that progress on the implementation of the fresh start agreement has been good. On 18 November, the day after it was reached, the Assembly passed a legislative consent motion for Westminster to go ahead with welfare legislation. The subsequent Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Act 2015 was given Royal Assent on 25 November and the related order was passed in early December. The Government are working closely with the Executive on the extensive secondary legislation that is required to deliver the new welfare system in Northern Ireland. We hope to be in a position to begin bringing that forward shortly, with a view to completing its passage through both Houses as soon as we can.

On 21 December, the UK and Irish Governments, along with the Northern Ireland Executive, established a Joint Agency Task Force to reinforce efforts to tackle cross-jurisdictional organised crime. The Executive have established the three-person panel envisaged by the agreement to make recommendations for a broad-ranging strategy to disband paramilitary groups. The appointments process for the new flags commission is under way. A Bill to reduce the number of Government Departments from 12 to nine has completed its consideration in the Assembly. A further Bill to reduce the number of Members of the Legislative Assembly per constituency from six to five is set for its final stage of consideration in the Assembly tomorrow.

The Bill before the House today represents further significant progress, dealing with elements of the fresh start agreement that require UK Government legislation. Clauses 1 to 5 make provision to put into effect a treaty, to be agreed between the UK and Irish Governments, that will establish the independent reporting commission. The Bill sets out the commission’s primary objective to promote progress towards ending paramilitary activity
connected with Northern Ireland. It will report on progress towards that objective and on the implementation of relevant measures by the UK Government, the Irish Government and the Executive that were agreed in the fresh start agreement. The Bill makes provision for key aspects of the new commission’s work, including the duties to which it will be subject and the legal privileges to be conferred on it as an international body. These are intended to ensure that the commission is able to engage with a range of sources of information in performing its important functions, but will avoid doing anything that might put life, safety or national security at risk. I appreciate that hon. Members will wish to see the text of the treaty. It has not been possible to provide that today, because it has not yet been agreed between the UK and Irish Governments, but we will of course place a copy in the Library of the House in due course as soon as we can.

Clause 6 and schedule 1 will extend the time available for the allocation of ministerial positions in the Executive from seven to 14 days after the Assembly meets following an election. The purpose of the change, as set out in the Stormont House agreement, is to allow parties more time to agree a programme for government on a cross-party basis prior to the allocation of ministerial positions. It is hoped that this will encourage a more bipartisan approach to the programme for government.

Clause 7 will amend the pledge of office for Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive, reflecting strong commitments set out in the fresh start agreement to give unequivocal support for the rule of law and to work collectively to achieve a society free of paramilitarism once and for all. Clause 8 will introduce a similar undertaking by all Members of the Assembly.

Clause 9 will implement the commitments in the fresh start agreement for the UK Government to legislate, with Assembly consent, to increase fiscal transparency in Executive budgets, thus helping the Executive to deliver an affordable and sustainable budget.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): If I may take the Secretary of State back to clause 8, I am very pleased about the introduction of a new pledge for all MLAs. They will not be able to participate in any proceedings, or do anything within the Assembly, unless and until they have taken the new pledge. When they have taken the new pledge, however, what sanctions will there be if they fail to honour it, and who will decide?

Mrs Villiers: Naturally enough, any sanctions relating to the actions of MLAs are matters for the Assembly, rather than for the Chamber and the legislation proposed here today. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention.

Clause 9 provides that the Northern Ireland Finance Minister will have a duty to specify—

Lady Hermon: I am terribly sorry to intervene on the Secretary of State again, but if I may say so that was a rather flippant response and not at all characteristic—she is always so well briefed. Clause 8 actually states:

“Standing orders shall provide for the procedure for giving the undertaking.”

It does not say in clause 8 that Standing Orders will be passed in the Assembly on sanctions for MLAs who do not honour the new pledge, so it must be in this proposed legislation.

Mrs Villiers: I am very sorry. I did not mean for my answer to sound flippant or not serious. It remains the case that the Bill does not provide for sanctions and neither does the fresh start agreement. In terms of internal matters of discipline within the Assembly, that really is a matter for the Assembly itself to determine. What I can provide further clarification on is that an individual who refuses to give the undertaking will not be able to participate in Assembly proceedings, or receive any of the privileges of office or salary.

Clause 9 provides that the Northern Ireland Finance Minister will have a duty to specify to the Assembly the amount of Government funding available, as notified by the Secretary of State. The Minister will have to show, when delivering a draft budget, that the amount of Government funding required by that draft budget does not exceed the amount specified as being available.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Before the Secretary of State moves on to that more detailed point, does she agree that the provisions outlined in the Bill should be extended here? Members who do not take their oath in this place receive privileges and benefits, and are not excluded. Maybe we should learn something from the situation in Northern Ireland and apply it to this place.

Mrs Villiers: I am very much aware of the concerns the hon. Gentleman and his party have on such matters. Issues relating to privileges and expenses are House business, and he and his colleagues are welcome to raise them at any time for the House to consider. In due course, we will look at Short money too.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Just to take a step back in relation to the cross-border task force, I understand a meeting was held in December 2015 to establish it. Can the Secretary of State clarify today how often the task force will meet or is it scheduled to meet?

Mrs Villiers: I think we need to distinguish between the ministerial meeting, which was a one-off, and the agency task force, which will meet regularly. I do not know that it has scheduled a timetable of meetings as yet, but I am sure that once it does I will be able to supply the hon. Gentleman with details. One would expect it to meet regularly to conduct its important work. The membership has been formulated, so it is already cracking on with its work.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that cross-border co-operation on a whole range of issues, not least organised crime, is made much easier by the fact that the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK are members of the European Union?

Mrs Villiers: I was wondering when that subject would come up. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there are a whole range of reasons why the relationship between the UK and Ireland has improved massively in recent years.
I have outlined the main features of this short, but important, piece of proposed legislation on Northern Ireland.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): There is one area that is not in the Bill. Will the Secretary of State inform the House when the legacy Bill will come forward? Many people throughout Northern Ireland are grieving deeply and want to know when the proposals will come forward.

**Mrs Villiers:** The hon. Lady raises a very important issue, which I was about to come on to. Sadly, I am not able to give her a date for the presentation of that proposed legislation, but, as I will go into, I am determined to work as hard as I possibly can to build the consensus necessary to enable us to introduce it. I agree with her: it is very important that we press ahead.

I must put on record my gratitude for the co-operation of Her Majesty’s Opposition in agreeing to a somewhat faster than usual passage of the Bill through the House. This should enable measures relating to the pledge of office, the undertaking and the extension of the time available for ministerial appointments to be in place in time for the new Assembly when it meets in May. It will enable the new independent reporting commission to be established as soon as possible.

I am very conscious, returning to the point made by the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), that some important elements of the Stormont House agreement are not, sadly, in the Bill we are discussing today.

**Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): Given that the welfare reform legislation was microwaved through here and that this Bill will be fast-tracked, can the Secretary of State give an undertaking that the legacy Bill will not be fast-tracked and that her commitment to building consensus will extend to proper consideration for victims and the wider public interest, and not just be something cobbled up between parties?

**Mrs Villiers:** I need to reflect on that, but I definitely agree with the hon. Gentleman that the legacy Bill will be in a very different category from the other two pieces of legislation—the Bill today and the welfare legislation. In those circumstances, we should do everything possible to make sure that it has an ordinary timetable. If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will not give an absolute undertaking on that for today’s purposes, but if we get to the stage of being able to present that Bill to Parliament, it is highly likely that we will want to proceed with it on the basis of an ordinary timetable rather than an expedited one, given the sensitivity of the issues.

As I set out in my speech in Belfast on 11 February, the Government are and remain committed to establishing these legacy bodies. We have a manifesto commitment to do so. We will continue our efforts to build the consensus needed to allow us to present legislation to this House. We have made more progress than any of our predecessors in getting close to achieving an agreed way forward on the past. We are now closer than ever, I think, to resolving the main outstanding problems standing in the way of getting these new bodies set up and operating.

I shall continue to engage with the political parties in Northern Ireland, with victims and survivors and with those who represent them, and I am particularly grateful for the input and work of the Commission for Victims and Survivors in trying to facilitate this process and for working hard to try, with me, to build consensus for the new bodies.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that one element of the legacy issue that is paramount in the minds of many survivors of the troubles is that under no account and under no circumstances must Northern Ireland be seen to go forward on the basis of treating the perpetrators of violence in the same way as those who were innocent victims of that very violence?

**Mrs Villiers:** I entirely agree. We on the Government side would never accept a rewriting of history. I think we should always recall the dedication of, and sacrifices made by, both the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the armed services in Northern Ireland. We should salute that sacrifice, and I am absolutely convinced that in the vast majority of cases, the members of the security forces performed their duties with the utmost integrity and professionalism.

I want to pay tribute, too, to the dignity and determination with which victims and survivors approach the legacy matters under discussion. I have been deeply moved on many occasions when I have met victims and survivors to hear of their experiences and their tragedies. I have welcomed the chance to meet many of them over my years as Secretary of State. They have different and divergent views on a number of issues, but almost all are agreed that the current mechanisms for tackling legacy cases are not working as they should.

The legacy bodies proposed in the Stormont House agreement will not be perfect and, sadly, even when they are set up, they will not provide every answer to every question. Sadly, no set of solutions that we could devise here or in Stormont could ever achieve that, but I believe that those bodies would deliver significantly better outcomes for victims and survivors than the status quo. For that reason, we will continue to pursue them with diligence and dedication.

As a result of the Stormont House and fresh start agreements, I think politics in Northern Ireland is probably more stable now than it has been over the past three years. Economically, although there was undoubtedly some heart-breaking news from Bombardier last week, it is still the case that 46,000 more people are in work compared with 2010 and the unemployment register is down by more than 40% since its peak in 2013. The fresh start agreement also takes us closer to the point where we can complete the transfer of corporation tax powers to the Executive—a move that I believe can have a transformative effect on the economy there.

As we go forward there will continue to be difficulties and challenges. I need hardly remind the House that despite some success in suppressing their activities, the threat from dissident republicans is severe and the need for vigilance is constant. We are also, of course, approaching some very sensitive centenaries—commemorations that can have very different meanings for different parts of the community. Northern Ireland has, I think, entered 2016 more positively than for some time. For our part, the Government remain determined to deliver our manifesto commitment to help build a brighter, more secure future for Northern Ireland. The Bill is intended to help that process, and I commend it to the House.
6.35 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to the debate, and I hope she stays in.

The Bill delivers some of the key aspects of the 17 November 2015 fresh start agreement and the 2014 Stormont House agreement. These agreements ended a financial and political impasse in Northern Ireland that threatened the survival of the devolved institutions and exposed us to the very real possibility of a return to direct rule, which would of course have been disastrous. The Bill is therefore very welcome.

As we address the substance of the Bill, it is crucial for us to stress the importance of economic development. As the Secretary of State acknowledged, the job losses announced at Bombardier last week were a terrible blow to advanced manufacturing in Northern Ireland and a personal tragedy for those who will lose their jobs and for their families. They will now, of course, have to seek employment elsewhere. Jobs in Northern Ireland, as across the UK, are crucial as the strength of the economy and opportunity help to deliver continued progress for everyone.

Of course Bombardier operates in an incredibly competitive global market and demand in that world market has not been as strong as we would have liked. However, the Government have a responsibility, so what are they doing to support those who remain at Bombardier? What are they doing to help ensure that those workers find a route back to employment as swiftly as possible? When the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), winds up the debate, will he say what support has been offered to the workforce and to the families. They will now, of course, have to seek employment elsewhere. Jobs in Northern Ireland, as across the UK, are crucial as the strength of the economy and opportunity help to deliver continued progress for everyone.

As we begin to discuss this Bill, let us remind ourselves that the previous 12 months have not been the easiest in Northern Ireland. The murders of Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan in the summer and the budgetary stalemate around the issue of welfare led to a political crisis that required all the skill and commitment of those involved to get an agreement to break the stalemate and allow progress to be made. I have said before and I want to put it on record again that all of those involved—the Secretary of State, all the parties in Northern Ireland, many of whom are represented here, and the Irish Government—deserve huge credit for achieving the fresh start agreement. Without that agreement, there was the real risk of the collapse of devolution or indeed the return to direct rule, either of which would have been unthinkable.

I know there was huge disappointment, as well, that no agreement could be reached on how to deal with the past. I and many others have raised this issue here over the last few weeks and months. As I said, however, I know that huge progress was made and I am glad that the Secretary of State has reiterated that now is not the time to give up, but to build on the progress that has been made while recognising the challenges and difficulties that remain.

The publication of the draft treaty on the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval was, I think, welcome—to show not only the direction of travel, but how much progress was made in the talks. Victims must be at the heart of any future agreement, as of any agreement—that is clear to us all. The recent allegations with respect to various atrocities of the past demonstrate more than ever the need for a process to be agreed. Victims must not feel that they are locked out of any progress, which is why I urge the Secretary of State to be as transparent as possible, even where difficulty remains, and to continue to seek agreement.

Agreement has not been reached on how to deal with the past so it could not be included in the Bill, but I say to the Secretary of State that we need to take an urgent look at the resources available to the Police Service of Northern Ireland and indeed the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland to support investigations and to speed up the inquests that they continue to be required to do. More and more delay for victims is unacceptable.

Conor McGinn: Does my hon. Friend agree—as I do—with the First Minister of Northern Ireland, who has said that we need to get real when it comes to the funding of investigations of legacy cases? The PSNI operates within stringent budget constraints. It has to prioritise front-line policing, but it is being asked to do more and more. While the current impasse exists, should it not receive funds from this place rather than having to use some of its own resources to deal with the legacy of the past?

Vernon Coaker: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and with the First Minister and others in Northern Ireland who have pointed out that, although agreement has not been reached on how to deal with the legacy issues, the PSNI, the Coroners Service for Northern Ireland and others are still required to deal with the consequences of those issues. Given that the Secretary of State has put aside money pending any agreement, surely it would be acceptable to give at least some of it to those bodies in order to reflect the continuing work that they must do in trying to investigate and resolve some of the difficulties. I think that the First Minister has made a perfectly reasonable request, and, although I know that the Secretary of State will not be able to respond to it now, I hope that she and the Minister—and, indeed, the Government as a whole—will consider it.

Mrs Villiers: May I intervene briefly to offer some assistance? The fresh start agreement makes it clear that the £150 million package to support the legacy work is linked to the establishment of the new bodies. However, we are listening carefully to representations, particularly those relating to inquests. If a credible reform package for inquests is put together, we will of course take very seriously any request for funds to support it.

Vernon Coaker: That is a helpful response. I think that everyone in the House—and, indeed, in Northern Ireland—will have heard what the Secretary of State has said, which implies that she is open to making money available both to the PSNI and to the Coroners Service. I think that that is what victims would expect. They know that it is difficult to reach an agreement on how to deal with the past—and, although the institutions, or the proposed institutions, are there, agreement has not been reached—but, at the same time, work has to be done. Given that the money is there, we would support the Secretary of State if she—or, for instance, the Treasury—estimated at any point that at least some of
the money could be released to enable that work to be done as soon as possible, because I think that people in Northern Ireland would expect it to be done as soon as possible. The First Minister would have been pleased to hear what the Secretary of State has said.

The House has been in the habit of dealing with Northern Ireland legislation in one day, but we believe that that should happen only when the need is truly urgent. We supported an emergency procedure with respect to welfare reform, and I promised the Secretary of State when I resumed my current role that we would maintain a bipartisan approach based on the principle of consent. I hope that our actions have demonstrated that commitment, but I want to make it clear that in this instance we have agreed to an expedited procedure rather than an emergency process. This procedure allows us more time to consider the Bill, while still making it possible for us to secure Royal Assent before the approaching Northern Ireland elections. I assume that any necessary legislative consent motion will be forthcoming in order to ensure that measures relating to the pledge of office, the MLA undertaking, and extension of the time available for ministerial appointments are in place in time for the Assembly’s return. I am told that the Northern Ireland parties themselves are keen for that to happen.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) made a fair and reasonable point about discussion of the legacy issues in due course. I think that anyone in Northern Ireland would expect discussion of those significant and important issues to take place by means of due process in the House, and not to be speeded up.

**Lady Hermon:** Will Her Majesty’s Opposition be tabling amendments to clause 8 to make it absolutely clear that a sanction will be applied to MLAs who make the pledge and take their seats, but then do not abide by the pledge that they have made? There is a code of ministerial responsibility for members of the Executive, and there are sanctions, but there are no sanctions in the Bill, and that is an obvious omission.

**Vernon Coaker:** I will say something about pledges later in my speech, but, whether we table amendments or not, I think that the hon. Lady is right to ask for clarification. I shall be quoting one of the pledges which contains a qualification, and I shall be asking what that means. Even if we accept that this is Stormont business, I think it is right for such questions to be asked in the House of Commons.

The Bill will establish an independent reporting commission to monitor progress towards ending paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. That is a key aspect of it. Paramilitary activity is totally unacceptable and has no place in Northern Ireland, but we shall have to consider in Committee what progress has already been made, and why this initiative will work when others have not. How will progress be judged, and what will happen if it stalls?

The issue of disclosure will also have to be explored in Committee. It is bound to arise, because the Bill requires the Secretary of State to provide guidance on how national security and individuals are to be protected. We shall need an explanation in order to ensure that the problems that prevented an agreement on how to deal with the past do not happen again and prevent the Commission from working effectively—or, indeed, from working at all.

The Bill modifies the pledge of office to be taken by Northern Ireland Ministers, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon). The revised pledge will include fresh obligations to work together on a shared objective of ridding society of all forms of paramilitary groups and activity, and the Bill introduces a parallel undertaking for Members of the Assembly, who must commit themselves to demonstrating a peaceful pursuit of change and progress. That is to be welcomed. However, the revised pledge includes seven newly agreed commitments, one of which is “to accept no authority direction, or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgement.” I think that, in Committee, Members may want to hear a full explanation of the qualification in that pledge.

The Bill extends the period allowed for the appointment of Northern Ireland Ministers, once the Assembly is elected, from seven to 14 days, which we hope will allow more time for a programme of government to be agreed. It also provides for the promotion of fiscal transparency and support for the Executive’s delivery of a stable and sustainable budget. It must be made clear what block grant the UK Government will provide, and how spending above that will be funded. I look forward to some interesting discussion of that in Committee.

**Ian Paisley:** Given the principle that the hon. Gentleman has accepted this evening, does he also accept the principle that if Members of the House of Commons do not take the oath, all the privileges that they gain here should be removed from them?

**Vernon Coaker:** As the Secretary of State has said, that is House business, but we expect all Members of this House to commit themselves to the pursuit of democracy and the making of decisions by democratic means.

**Ian Paisley:** If the hon. Gentleman accepts that principle, will he—through the usual channels, and with the support of the Opposition and the Government—table a motion in order to resolve, finally, the anomaly that allows Irish Republican Sinn Féin Members to benefit from privileges in the House without taking the oath?

**Vernon Coaker:** As I have said, that is House business and I therefore cannot commit myself, but the hon. Gentleman has heard what I have said. We expect all Members of this House to commit themselves to democracy and the democratic process, and I think that that is what all of us have done.

I was talking about the budget, the promotion of fiscal transparency, and support for the Executive’s delivery of a stable and sustainable budget. This is another area that will need to be examined in Committee.

Northern Ireland is not out of conflict; it is coming out of conflict. Huge progress has been made, but challenges remain. The cloud of paramilitary activity still hangs over too many communities and impacts on too many people. This activity, whether republican or loyalist, never had a place in society, and it certainly has no place now.

The major elements of this Bill represent another step towards the principle that must be at the heart of any democracy: that the rule of law is paramount in every community—law enforced by the police and subject to an
The success of this Bill, the new pledges and the independent commission will be judged on how far they bring that goal about.

6.50 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I just want to make a fairly brief intervention in this debate. Before I do so, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wonder whether you will allow me a few seconds to refer and pay tribute to my constituency assistant who died very suddenly a few days ago. His name was Mark Calway, and he worked for me for 14 years and took a particular interest in matters Northern Ireland—and indeed in matters the Republic of Ireland—helping me quite a bit with my work on the Select Committee and as co-chairman of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. His death is a stunning shock, and my heart goes out to his parents, Brian and Maureen. I do hope it is in order for me to pay the greatest tribute to him possible today. All hon. Members know how much we depend on our staff, and when they are personal friends as well, such a loss, at the age of 49, is terrible. Thank you very much indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker.

May I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for the work she has done in getting us to this point? I know—or I think I know—how difficult things were back in September when it looked as though the institutions in Northern Ireland might collapse. I know how much work she put in—or I am guessing I know that. Her dedication was total. She was absolutely determined that the institutions would not collapse and that we would in fact find some degree of agreement and a solution that would enable us to move forward. The fact that we are here today demonstrates that she was successful in that, so I really do want to pay tribute to her—and her team—for the very hard work and extraordinarily long hours put into this.

Before I was Select Committee Chairman, I served as shadow Minister for about five years. During some of that time we dealt with an awful lot of legislation—statutory instruments—in Committee upstairs, taking major decisions on behalf of the Province and the people in Northern Ireland. On many of those occasions, at the beginning of my speeches I said how wrong and inappropriate it was to govern the Province in that way, yet we really did face the prospect of going back to the previous situation, and that worried and frightened me. It came about as a result of a couple of tragic murders in Northern Ireland and the linkage between them and people in the Assembly who were allegedly sympathetic to that kind of activity. I am very pleased that this Bill makes it clear that there is no place, either in this place or the Assembly in Northern Ireland, for people who hold those beliefs.

Many years ago we heard the famous and chilling statement that some people would proceed with the Armalite in one hand and the ballot box in the other. Those days are long gone, and anybody who tries to practise that or carry out politics in that way should be in prison, deprived of their liberty. There is no place in the Northern Ireland Assembly for that kind of people. We would not want to work on Committees in this House or anywhere else with people who by day are in the debating Chamber and at night are on the streets causing trouble and wreaking havoc. We would not accept it in this place, and it should not be accepted in Northern Ireland, so I am very pleased that the Bill paves the way for removing that kind of behaviour.

Ian Paisley: I appreciate the point the hon. Gentleman is making. Sometimes we do have to stop and pinch ourselves and recognise how far Northern Ireland has come in recent years. The point he is making about Northern Ireland politicians taking decisions about the needs of the people of Northern Ireland is emphasised today, as there have been something like 26 amendments on the Floor of the Northern Ireland Parliament today, being voted and consulted on and considered by Northern Ireland’s elected representatives. That shows that instead of decisions being taken in Committee Rooms here, they are being taken in Northern Ireland by the elected representatives on the Floor of the Assembly, and they are very prosperous and good decisions.

Mr Robertson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, which emphasises far more strongly than I was able to the importance of the Assembly’s functioning. When we sat in Committee taking big decisions, the great problem was that by the nature of the arithmetic of this House, there were very few people on the Committee from Northern Ireland. The decisions were taken by people like me and many others from English constituencies, with very few representatives from Northern Ireland, so the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to make that point.

The most urgent priority was dealing with the paramilitary aspect, but there were other issues, which are dealt with in the Bill. One was the agreeing of the budgets. I have mentioned before what happens when there is power-sharing rather than the straight democratic system that we have in this House. We all know why we have that power-sharing, and it has brought people together, but there may be times when there has to be compromise in the way the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive do business. There may be times when politicians in the Assembly and the Executive take their stances, make their points and make their objections, but at the end of the day there has to be agreement; if not, and if there is an overuse of the petitions of concern—I accept that both sides have used them to excess—it is not going to be very helpful. If we cannot get agreement on important issues such as the budget, we face the rather dark prospect of the institutions collapsing, as we almost saw, and power being brought back to this House. That is not something I want to see.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman refers to issues on which consensus and agreement were reached. Does he agree that the issue of corporation tax was one on which consensus was reached eventually, and that people were and are looking forward to the prospect of possibly tens of thousands of jobs being created in Northern Ireland? How does he feel about the fact that the delay in reaching that consensus was principally down to Northern Ireland’s and the UK’s membership of the EU? It seemed to delay it for many years.

Mr Robertson: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point and I would make two points in response. When the Select Committee looked at the issue—it was the first issue we looked at under my chairmanship back in 2010—it was not unanimous in its support for
devolving responsibilities for corporation tax, but all the parties in general were in favour of it. Corporation tax was one of the few issues that every party in Northern Ireland agreed with the policy on, which was a real positive.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, I am afraid. We could have done something about it then. The corporation tax rate for Northern Ireland could have been changed in 2010, or long before that, had it not been for our membership of the EU. I am not sure how far Mr Deputy Speaker will allow me to pursue that argument, but even if we wanted to reduce VAT on tourism in Northern Ireland, it would not be legal under EU rules. There are a number of ways of looking at membership of the EU. We spent two and a half hours on it earlier, and I do not suppose we will be allowed to spend too much longer on it now, but the point the hon. Gentleman makes is absolutely right.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just reassure the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson): there is always Thursday for it?

Mr Robertson: Indeed there is, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I was saying that I accept that petitions of concern have been used to excess by both sides and had not been very helpful in coming to agreements on important issues. This is not contained in the legislation, but I know that the fresh start agreement did address that point and did request in a very strong way, as it were, that that facility should not be abused for the reasons we have given.

I do not wish to detain the House any longer, but this small but important Bill moves us in the right direction. I compliment and congratulate the Secretary of State on introducing it and—as I said earlier—on the enormous amount of hard work she has put in.

7 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I shall be brief to allow time for other Members to make substantive contributions to the debate, and to spare Members from having to listen to my voice for too much longer.

There were, and are, people who would rather see this whole process fail than succeed. They have their reasons, and there is some form of logic that underpins that position. It is, however, the right of a people to govern themselves, to take decisions close to home, and to protect their peace. In Northern Ireland, that peace was fashioned relatively recently and at great expense, and it is harried by a continual undercurrent from disaffected minorities. Political leaders on all sides of the debate in Northern Ireland, and in the past a great deal of such legislation has been passed on an emergency basis. Although often that was unavoidable and understandable, we all accept—not least for the reasons outlined by the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson)—that that was not the best way to operate. Often, such emergency legislation was the result of some breakdown or failure of the political process in Northern Ireland, and I am glad that the Bill does not fall into that category.

The people of Northern Ireland suffered the effects of the troubles, and they continue to suffer them now in the form of higher unemployment and a legacy of arrested community development—I associate myself very much with comments made by the shadow Secretary of State about economic development. Nothing will change that overnight, but we are at least now looking in the right direction, and the SNP supports the Bill.
[Mr Nigel Dodds]

This Bill has been drafted as a result of political agreement, and not political disagreement or crisis. It is based on a political agreement from last November, and it has involved considerable consultation and work in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in the Northern Ireland Executive. The Bill is only part of the implementation process of the Stormont agreement. A long list of issues were agreed, and they are all being progressed and implemented either in the Assembly, through this House, or directly administratively by the Executive and other agencies, as set out by the Secretary of State. I welcome that progress. The Executive in Northern Ireland has already agreed that a legislative consent motion should be put before the Assembly for clauses that deal with devolved matters, and I understand that that motion will come before the Assembly in mid-March.

I am confident that despite the need to fast-track the Bill, we will have the opportunity for adequate consideration. It is important that a number of measures introduced by the Bill are in place so that when Assembly elections are held and the results come in, everything is in place for the new Assembly and Executive to operate under the new legislation, without any hiccup, delay, or question mark about that. In particular, it is essential that the House deals with the agreement of a programme for government, extending the period to appoint Ministers, new paragraphs for the pledge of office, and an undertaking for Members of the Legislative Assembly, before the Assembly is dissolved at the end of March.

Lady Hermon: In the light of the recent controversy surrounding the scrutiny of MLAs’ expenses, and—unfortunately—the damage that that does to public confidence in the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Bill would be an appropriate vehicle with which to introduce in Northern Ireland an institution comparable to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, so as to rebuild public confidence in the expenses vetting procedure in Northern Ireland?

Mr Dodds: IPSA is a whole other area of debate, and I am sure it will evoke much argument and discussion in this House. The DUP suggested the introduction of an IPSA-style regime some time ago, but we could not get agreement on that. The First Minister of Northern Ireland made a speech on Friday night, outlining again the importance of transparency and of that matter being dealt with and taken forward in precisely that way. Whether the Bill is the right vehicle for that remains to be seen, because it would require agreement and consultation within Northern Ireland. That could—and indeed should—happen, and I encourage parties to do that. It is important to maintain confidence in the integrity of the Assembly. We in this House know what it is to have gone through that kind of controversy, and we want to ensure that things are progressed properly, openly, and with the utmost transparency.

However, when IPSA reported on expenses in Northern Ireland, it found a pretty satisfactory situation overall—it is not as if the entire situation was unsatisfactory. We must ensure that there is confidence, and I and the DUP support whatever steps are needed to introduce an open and transparent system in which such matters are not decided or administered by Members; I hope others will agree.

The Bill, as the Secretary of State has said, seeks to implement aspects of the fresh start agreement, which represents a new beginning for politics in Northern Ireland. I totally agree with what she said about the situation in Northern Ireland. It is more positive now. There is a more positive view of the Assembly and politics, because people have seen that agreement can be made. It was difficult, but things can get done when there is agreement and we can move forward. We must continue to build on that.

It was not, of course, possible to resolve every issue, especially in relation to the past. We have discussed that and will discuss it in much greater detail. Of course, it is not in the Bill—we should be discussing what is in the Bill—but I want to state again that, as far as our party is concerned, we are quite happy for the details of how far we go on all that to be published so that the victims, their families and all the people affected can see openly how much work is being done, how much progress has been made, where the gaps are and what needs to be done to bring the process to a conclusion.

The two issues that threatened imminent destruction of devolution at that time—paramilitary violence and welfare reform—have been addressed, agreed on and dealt with and are subject to provisions in the Bill. The resolution of the welfare reform issue was extremely important; the importance of resolving it cannot be underestimated. It was the single most important issue, from a financial perspective, to be resolved to allow the Assembly to function. I deeply regret that even after the fresh start agreement there were still Members of this House and of the Assembly who opposed the implementation of the agreement. They did not seem to recognise that without a budget that measures up and is sustainable, one cannot continue with devolution.

I am glad that there are politicians in Northern Ireland who are prepared to face up to reality, grapple with difficult problems and sit down to reach sensible outcomes through dialogue and agreement. I am pleased that this House was able to take forward the welfare reforms and the Northern Ireland Assembly was able to agree that the mitigations and some of the enhancements to the welfare system will be allowed to proceed as well. Of course, that is very important. We on these Benches would not have designed this welfare system for Northern Ireland, but it recognises the constraints and parameters within which we must operate financially while going a fair distance to meet some of the problems and issues raised by our constituents.

I am pleased that all the major targets under the fresh start agreement and the implementation plan are being met and that deadlines are being kept. Unlike with the Stormont House agreement of 2014, I believe that there is every reason to expect that every aspect will be implemented in full. On the welfare reform agreement, it is important to note that Eileen Evason’s group made recommendations that came in under budget and will be implemented by the Assembly and the Executive. That allows more money to be spent in other areas by the Executive, who have now passed a budget for next year ahead of time which has been dealt with by the Assembly as it should have been.

On the issue of paramilitary violence, the panel on paramilitary disbandment has been set up and has begun its work. The trilateral meeting to tackle paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime met before Christmas.
The Executive are seized of the importance of making progress on this issue, because, at the end of the day, as we made very clear when the crisis blew up, we are not prepared to sweep these matters under the carpet. They must be faced up to by everyone who wants to see Northern Ireland move forward. There must be not only a commitment in words to democracy and the rule of law but an implementation of that in practice. That is why we on these Benches, and back in the Assembly, as elected representatives of the people, will not allow these matters simply to be ignored or to be used as a political football for a temporary political point-scoring exercise before being forgotten about. We are serious about these issues and we want them to be addressed, and to be addressed properly.

I am also glad that the Executive has agreed the reduction in the corporation tax rate to commence from April 2018. The reduction to 12.5% is an extremely important addition to the range of attractions that Invest Northern Ireland will be able to go out and promote across the world to possible investors and those who are interested in coming to Northern Ireland. I welcome that and express our gratitude to the Government for their support on this matter. Many parties and people who will no doubt claim credit now gave up on corporation tax. Our party never gave up on it. Some people said that the possibility was over and done with and would never happen—that is the reality—but we did not give up.

I pay tribute to the former First Minister of Northern Ireland, Peter Robinson, who made corporation tax a very important issue. He recognised the value of having the measure in place. Indeed, I pay tribute to him for the work he did, along with the Secretary of State and other parties, to make this fresh start agreement happen. His commitment to ensuring stability in devolution cannot be underestimated. He deserves an enormous amount of credit for the agreement. The corporation tax provision, in particular, was something that he felt very strongly about and that our party has always believed in. I am glad that it is now proceeding. When the First Minister goes to New York and Washington and to the west coast in March, along with the Deputy First Minister and others, the strength of her argument about coming to invest in Northern Ireland will have been greatly increased as a result of this agreement. This tax reduction is another reason why there should be investment in Northern Ireland.

The legislation to reduce the number of MLAs and reorganise and reduce the number of Government Departments is also nearing completion. As we heard, tomorrow there will be further debate on that. The Assembly has passed a resolution to allow an official opposition to be created and that work has been taken forward by the Assembly authorities. Nominations have been sought from the parties and applications sought from the public for the flags commission, and we expect that to be established by the end of March. There has also been progress made on the fiscal council and the compact civic advisory panel.

All in all, progress on the fresh start agreement has been very positive and has heralded a better atmosphere at Stormont, where things are getting done. The Bill is a further positive step in implementing what has been agreed. If I might say so in passing, it is an interesting commentary on the media that when there is a hold-up in the Assembly, a massive issue of confrontation on political issues, a stand-off or when things are not getting done, there is a mass of attention and commentary. We do not hear the same reporting or the same level of discussion in the media, on the radio and on television when things are getting done, day by day and week by week. Legislation has been passed and progress is being made, but it is as if nothing is happening at all. There is hardly any reporting at all—I do not hear about any of it. It is interesting how sometimes good news, positive developments and progress are massively under-reported in Northern Ireland, whereas anything negative or bad is given massive prominence.

As other Members have said, it is worth putting on record the distance that Northern Ireland has come and the progress that has been made. For all the backward steps and ups and downs, we have made enormous progress. The political institutions that came back after the St Andrews agreement have provided a much more stable environment and I believe that that needs to be celebrated.

Ian Paisley: The story that will appear in tomorrow’s newspaper—we might as well set up for them—will be a photograph of the number of Members in the Chamber now compared with a photograph of the number of Members in the Chamber three hours ago, when the Prime Minister was speaking. It is such a crass story, but they run it week in, week out, telling people to look at the lack of interest in this place when Northern Ireland is being discussed compared with when a European issue or a financial issue is being discussed. We might as well ask the press to go ahead and publish that anyway.

Mr Dodds: On such issues, I always think that quality, not quantity, is what matters. I apply that to all Members present in the House; every Member who is here for this debate is of the highest quality. I welcome those who are here, particularly Members from constituencies outside Northern Ireland, including those who have served on the Select Committee and taken an interest in Northern Ireland matters. Their support and interest in Northern Ireland is greatly welcomed, and we value it very much indeed. I have already commented on some issues about press and media reporting, and my hon. Friend will understand if I do not take that too much further now.

We could go into detail on the independent reporting commission and other matters, but this is a Second Reading debate and so is about the generality of the Bill. We will have more opportunities to discuss it, and I welcome the fact that the Committee stage will be taken on the Floor of the House. I welcome the good co-operation that there has been between the Government, Opposition Front Benchers and the Northern Ireland parties on how this Bill should proceed. It has been an excellent example of how parliamentary scrutiny should happen. As I say, we understand why this Bill needs to be fast-tracked. It is not being done out of any sense of crisis; it is being done out of a sense of wanting to make sure that progress continues to be made and that the provisions are in place before the Assembly elections. We wish the Bill well, and we thank those who have been responsible for the agreement on introducing it and those who have worked so hard to bring this Second Reading debate to fruition.
Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I want to speak briefly about a number of faults or flaws in the Bill, which we certainly hope to address during its next stage.

Tackling paramilitary activity is paramount, and paramilitary activity continues to blight our society in Northern Ireland, not least in and around my constituency, where Gerard Davison and Kevin McGuigan were both ruthlessly gunned down in the past 12 months. Such events may not, thankfully, be as common as they once were, but they still happen on our streets. Those two murders are stark reminders of the paramilitary activity that persists nearly two decades after the Good Friday agreement was signed.

Throughout the talks that led to the Bill, we were clear that a whole-community approach is imperative if we are to root out paramilitary activity once and for all. Parties cannot and must not be seen to indulge in any class of paramilitary activity, in any circumstances, at any time. That should not be limited to certain groups or individuals, or to activity in certain constituencies; there should be no exclusions or opt-outs. It requires unequivocal and universal condemnation, and a united front, from all democratic parties and from all in civic society. Any vestige of paramilitary behaviour or structures is an affront to democracy, not just in Northern Ireland but anywhere else where it might exist, and should not be accepted. Furthermore, such vestiges continue to blight, obstruct and undermine every opportunity for economic recovery, which is desperately needed in Northern Ireland in the light of some of the news of the past couple of weeks.

The pledge proposed in the Bill, to be undertaken by Ministers and Members of the Legislative Assembly, is a step in the right direction, but the content of the pledge requires further scrutiny, particularly on the transition away from paramilitary activity. We in the Social Democratic and Labour party realise that ridding our society of paramilitary activity will by no means be an overnight process, but support in the transition has been allowed to become, or be seen as, a degree of tolerance of some element of paramilitary activity. That cannot be allowed any further.

The big absence in the Bill is, of course, any reference to the legacies of the past and, particularly, to issues that have been left out. We would like it to make much greater progress on dealing with flags and parading. Those things lead to disturbance and need to be addressed, as does dealing with the past and its legacy.

The Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State referred to the economy. During the Stormont House talks we discussed prosperity and the need for an overall comprehensive economic recovery strategy, or a prosperity strategy, but somehow that has been forgotten about. Corporation tax has been mentioned. The SDLP was talking about that 20 years ago and has fully supported this approach at all times in between, but corporation tax will not do everything—it is not a magic bullet, dare I say? There is a desperate need for third-level education, training, apprenticeships and skills development, to go along with propping up and developing a newer and better economy. I say to the Secretary of State that I would have been keen to have some reference in the Bill to the economy and creating a prosperity process. I know that there are issues she wishes to deal with urgently, but we need to address a dire economic situation, and attention has been drawn to that by the Bombardier situation.

Mrs Villiers: I want to provide reassurance that, like the Northern Ireland Executive, the UK Government are absolutely committed to enhancing and increasing prosperity in Northern Ireland. Our main vehicle for the work we do together is the economic pact, so the fact that the issue was not expressly referred to in the fresh start agreement does not mean the two Administrations are not working closely to bring that about.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Secretary of State for that, and I am reassured, but I look forward to further stages of the Bill and the opportunity to flesh it out, amend it and make additions, where appropriate, to ensure that it is as comprehensive as possible and does all that we would expect it to do.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): May I start by not only giving our sympathy to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) for losing his assistant, but sending our huge thanks to him and the many others who have helped us in Northern Ireland, be it through the British-Irish Parliamentary Association, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee or in other ways? A mass of people are always trying to help us get somewhere.

I welcome the Bill, although I still have doubts about various parts of it. We felt when we saw it that it was a bit of a sticking plaster, rather than a chance to have a rebirth of Stormont. I welcome the many changes that are being made, but we want to see whether they really get there. Today, I wish to touch on a few changes that we want to see in the Bill and on some of our concerns.

When the independent reporting commission is appointed, we would like to see more people involved than just the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.
Too much of what happens in Northern Ireland tends to be done by the two main parties in the Executive. We must find a different way. We could go through the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission. Whatever way we choose, we should move away from just involving the two main parties.

I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State will put the guidance in place. It is certainly necessary to have somebody outside of ourselves to help move us along, although I realise that such a task is a poisoned chalice at times and may well require the wisdom of Solomon. None the less, we do need guidance. I know that it falls on our shoulders most of the time, but, as I have long been saying, we should not leave it all to the devolved Assembly. We must have Westminster working with Stormont. We should all pull together and work together instead of things being left to Stormont when everything gets stuck.

I am really happy to see in the Bill the change from seven to 14 days to try to get a programme for government in place. We must remember that it was my hon. Friend the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) who put that idea forward when he was leader of our party. He wanted a longer period of time to be available to get Ministers chosen, but in line with an overall programme for government, which I hope will be achieved within 14 days. If there is any doubt in that regard, will the Secretary of State look at how we can get something in place to ensure that it happens? We want not Ministers working in silos but a joint programme for government well into the future.

I very much welcome everything in the Bill to do with trying to remove paramilitaries from Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist party was very much behind raising that matter to the top of the agenda during the talks. I would like the Secretary of State and the Minister to make it clear exactly what is meant by “paramilitary”. As we take the Bill forward, I am sure that that is where we will find many of our difficulties. There are many grey areas that need to be clarified. For example, will someone who knocks on doors asking for funding to help pay for the bonfires be called a paramilitary? Will someone who raises the Union flag be deemed a paramilitary? Over many years, the Union flag, which should be the flag of all of us and not offensive to anyone, has been turned by some members of the community into a sectarian flag, which it should not be. Will someone who puts up that flag be treated as a paramilitary? We need clarity, and we need to talk our way through this. One story from my patch is that members of the Boys Brigade were going to take their standards into the local church. They were prevented from taking in the Union flag by one party, which said that such action was sectarian. We need to stop that happening.

There are other matters that need clarifying. When I started off in the council, I was lucky to go to France with a group that would have been known as one of the bonfire groups from Antrim. In those days, it cost us £120,000 to clear up after the bonfires. We had 11 different community groups—others would have given them stronger titles than that—that did not talk to each other. Going away together allowed us to get everyone to work together to find ways forward and find the commonalities that existed. In time, we reduced the number of bonfires and improved most of them—not all. The next time we had the bonfires, it cost only £40,000 to clear up. We must be absolutely clear—will such groups be deemed paramilitaries? If Members of the Legislative Assembly and others talk to such groups, will they be seen to be dealing with paramilitaries when they take the oath? We need clarity on the whole issue.

As the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) said, we need an organisation with teeth to allow us to ensure that MLAs, Ministers and others are abiding by their oaths. It is essential that we find a way of enforcing that in the future, but we must all do it together. I agree with what has been said about IPSA. We have discussed whether we should try to get IPSA into the Bill, because it is essential that we get something that works much better in Northern Ireland. Most people in Northern Ireland do not think that expenses are under control. They do not think that anyone accepts any responsibility when they have done something wrong. There is such a whiff of corruption, or of things not being right, that we must have an organisation with some sort of teeth, and IPSA seems to carry out such duties extremely well, so let us try to bring it in.

It is great to hear that there are moves for an Opposition in Northern Ireland, but we need to put one or two things into the Bill to allow us to improve how that operates—whether it is on the finance or how Committees are manned—so that we really have a proper Opposition. We must be careful about how we deal with that, but we need to work together.

I long to see things happening when it comes to legacy. I know that we all had differences, and the issues need to be dealt with quickly, but not so fast that we do not all get the chance to talk and have our say. It is vital that Northern Ireland finds a way forward that moves us away from all the legacy issues, so that we can begin to thrive and build our future together.

We have had much mention of corporation tax, but it is not the silver bullet. We must do a whole mass of other things together. As a party, we wanted the devolution of corporation tax years ago, but there were differences between the parties on how it would work, which really slowed things up. Let us get everything in place—better infrastructure, air passenger duty and rates changes—and let us work on all those issues together. I see the Bill as a start to the improvements in Northern Ireland.

7.36 pm

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I pay tribute to the Secretary of State and the Minister for all the work that they and their teams have done to bring forward this Bill. Having been involved in much of the negotiations in the past, I can say in all honesty—we should always give credit when it is due—that the Secretary of State has gone way up in my estimation for the clear stance that she has taken on issues both in the public domain and privately around the negotiating table. She has done so with great clarity and that is something to be welcomed from a Secretary of State. She has also been ably supported by the Minister.

I pay tribute to Mark Calway, who worked for my hon. Friend the Member for Twemsebury (Mr Robertson). I had the pleasure of meeting him on several occasions as he took an interest in Northern Ireland. I know that my hon. Friend and his team will feel his loss very deeply, and we extend our sympathy to him and to Mark’s family.
Tackling paramilitarism is an important element of this agreement, and it is long overdue. As a party, we have pressed time and again for the paramilitaries to leave the stage. At times I have heard their spokespersons in the media talk about their big contribution to the peace process, but they have delivered little by way of the necessary steps. For far too long, they have been begrudging about the action that the paramilitary organisations need to take. They have continued to straddle the fence between democracy and the rule of law on the one side, and continued involvement in criminality and at times, sadly, in murder on the other.

One reason for the political crisis in Northern Ireland last year was precisely to do with this continued involvement by members of paramilitary organisations in criminal activity and in carrying out murders. As the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) reminded us, those murders took place in his constituency. We need to be absolutely clear that there is no room for ambiguity, for grey areas or for straddling the fence between the rule of the law and involvement in criminality and paramilitarism.

The people of Northern Ireland deserve better, which is why it is vital that we continue to pursue this agenda, and the Stormont agreement marks a significant step in taking it forward.

Lady Hermon: The right hon. Gentleman condemns paramilitarism, whatever shape or form it takes—loyalist paramilitaries as well as republican paramilitaries. In that connection, will he put on record his thanks, and the thanks of many people, to the Police Service of Northern Ireland for completing yet another search for the remains of Lisa Dorrian, who disappeared 11 years ago, and was murdered by those with loyalist paramilitary connections? Her family have never had her returned for a Christian burial, and tragically her mother died broken-hearted earlier this year. I would be grateful if the right hon. Gentleman condemned equally loyalist and republican paramilitaries.

Mr Donaldson: The hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) and others have made reference to things that are not in the Bill, and it is a matter of regret that we cannot yet legislate for the provisions of the Stormont House agreement dealing with legacy matters. The Democratic Unionist party supports full implementation of the Stormont House agreement. We are doing nothing that holds back implementation of the agreement. We are all aware that implementation has not taken place because of a stand-off or impasse on the question of national identity. That will also apply in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. In recent times, we have seen the effects of paramilitary gangster-type activity in Dublin, which is unacceptable, and we must all co-operate to ensure that such activity is brought to an end. I hope that the good people of the Republic of Ireland, who go to the polls shortly, will think long and hard about who they elect to their national Parliament and where they stand on questions such as the special criminal court and the need to bring to an end paramilitarism, gangsterism and criminality, wherever they develop and emerge.

We welcome changes to the pledge of office for Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive and, crucially, a new undertaking to be given by all Members elected to the Assembly after May that will commit them to non-violence and to supporting the rule of law. No such undertaking has been required in the past, even though an undertaking is required of councillors in local government. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is absolutely right: we need to be sure that it is not just a question of a paper exercise but that sanctions are in place so that if Members breach that undertaking they can be held to account. I assure her that we will examine the Standing Orders of the Northern Ireland Assembly to see whether such a sanction exists. If it does not, we are prepared to introduce and support an amendment to the Bill to ensure that provision is made for such a sanction.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) and others have made reference to things that are not in the Bill, and it is a matter of regret that we cannot yet legislate for the provisions of the Stormont House agreement dealing with legacy matters. The Democratic Unionist party supports full implementation of the Stormont House agreement. We are doing nothing that holds back implementation of the agreement. We are all aware that implementation has not taken place because of a stand-off or impasse on the question of national identity. Here I differ from the hon. Gentleman. He talked about victims, but I am interested not just in the victims of the past but in ensuring that we do not have more victims in future. When we take action that compromises the security of our people and brings into the public domain the manner in which the security forces operate to counter terrorism, we put people at risk in Northern Ireland. We put lives at risk, and we create the potential for future victims in Northern Ireland, because sadly not everyone has signed up to the peace
process. Not all paramilitary organisations are on ceasefire. People out there today are targeting others—in my own constituency, in the past couple of weeks there have been two instances of prison officers having to leave their home because of threats from dissident republican organisations.

Knowledge and intelligence have, thankfully, prevented attacks from going ahead, which tells us that our security services continue to operate to prevent loss of life and prevent further victims from being created. I would say to the hon. Member for Belfast South and the Social Democratic and Labour party that, yes, we want the maximum disclosure that is available, but we also need to ensure that the security of the people we represent is protected. Yes, we want processes to be in place for innocent victims of terrorism to enable them to have access to information and justice and a degree of closure. At the same time, we must not compromise the ability of the security forces to protect the community in Northern Ireland and prevent further victims from being created in future.

On the national security issue, no democratic party should give cover to Sinn Féin on this issue, because we know that what their game is. It is about rewriting the history of the troubles. The reality is that 90% of all the killings that occurred in the troubles were carried out by paramilitary organisations. However, if we look at the media coverage, read the newspapers and look at the amount of money spent on investigations and inquests, proportionately far more of that resource goes on the 10% of deaths attributed to the state. Many of those deaths were the result of the security forces killing people who were engaged in acts of terrorism, but far more emphasis is put on those deaths than on the 90% of innocent victims murdered by paramilitary organisations.

Mr Gregory Campbell: I agree with my right hon. Friend on the 90% versus the 10%, but it now appears that in some instances where the Provisional IRA carried out atrocities there is an attempt by Sinn Féin to blame those in the security forces, the police and the Army. The abysmal audacity of some people knows no bounds, beyond even what my right hon. Friend described.

Mr Donaldson: My hon. Friend is right. We apply the same standard to republican-related murders and loyalist-related murders. The idea that the Ulster Volunteer Force, for example, would be exonerated from the Loughinisland killings in the constituency of the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) because of allegations of collusion is just as perverse and absurd as the idea that the IRA would be exonerated from the massacres and murders that it committed in the past. The same applies on both sides.

In conclusion, we want to see progress in dealing with the legacy issues. We want to see the historical investigations unit established, with full police powers to investigate the unsolved murders. I talk to the innocent victims, and as they look on at what is happening, they feel that they are not being given a fair crack of the whip on an opportunity. We must move matters on. In the interim—I raised this before with the Secretary of State—the First Minister, Arlene Foster, has supported the call for the resources already set aside for historical investigations to be allocated to the legacy investigation unit of the PSNI so that that money does not come out of front-line policing in Northern Ireland.

The PSNI needs to continue to deal with current crime and with the current terrorist threat, so we do not want to see the police budget depleted by the continued drawing down of resources for the investigation of legacy cases. Those need to be investigated, absolutely, but we hope the Secretary of State will listen to what the Chief Constable and the First Minister have said and allow some of that resource to be freed up and transferred to the PSNI to enable it to do more to help the innocent victims of terrorism.

7.54 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Like others, I welcome progress on the Bill. There are two aspects on which the Ulster Unionist party has been to the fore. The first is the continuing terrorist activity in Northern Ireland and beyond. The second, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan), is the need for more time after elections to allow negotiations on a programme for government. We hope that those two weeks will be beneficial for Northern Ireland in the next term of the Assembly and in future. I look on those as positive aspects. The extension of the time for negotiations was proposed by us as far back as 2011.

I am almost tempted to go into some topics that are not in the Bill, but perhaps what is in the Bill is enough for us to discuss. The legacy issues will need to be dealt with and there must be equality and fairness in any inquiry or investigation. That is not apparent now. For example, I understand that the PSNI legacy unit has almost 20 officers involved in the Bloody Sunday inquiries. That is fine. The problem is that there is not one PSNI officer currently working on the Enniskillen investigation, for example, so there is a huge imbalance.
On the commission to look into terrorist or paramilitary activities, we must consider recent history, even since the Belfast and St Andrews agreements were signed. The UDA, the UVF and loyalist paramilitary and terrorist organisations have been mentioned. They have been responsible for some brutal murders. We have just heard the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) mention Lisa Dorrian. It is a terrible affliction that her family suffers daily. I cannot imagine what it is like.

On the opposite side also, the republican movement, particularly the IRA, has been responsible for some brutal murders. Let us not forget that, as has been mentioned, the IRA and Sinn Féin are inextricably linked and they sit at the heart of Government. Think of some of the murders that have taken place—Robert McCartney, Denis Donaldson, Paul Quinn and more recently Kevin McGuigan. What strikes me about all those is not just the brutality, but the clinical way in which those murders were carried out. Such planned executions could be carried out only by an organisation with the ability of the IRA.

Let us not forget that the Chief Constable said that the IRA and the army council still exist. We need to deal with that and with the question of whether they are inextricably linked with Sinn Féin. That is a major question that will hang over the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland people for years to come. That is why there is major concern in Northern Ireland that someone who may still be a member of the IRA army council will have the privilege of appointing representatives to the commission.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is outlining the case that Sinn Féin and the IRA are one and the same. Does he agree that in all probability in the two weeks after the Assembly election that will remain the case when decisions have to be made about whether to be in the Executive or out of it?

Tom Elliott: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman. That has been the case for some time now, and it will remain the case, irrespective of what the commission comes up with. There will remain a huge question mark over some people’s right to remain senior members of the Executive.

The second aspect of the Bill is the pledge of office for Ministers and the undertaking for MLAs. That is welcome, but I have major concerns about its effectiveness. The hon. Member for North Down indicated that she is concerned about how sanctions—if there are any—will be applied, and I agree with her. Whether we can do anything about that may be an issue for the Committee stage, and I do not know whether the Secretary of State will come back with any suggestions on that. However, I am not so sure whether a pledge of ministerial office or an undertaking as an Assembly Member will make much difference to people who bombed and murdered in the past. If people could do that in the past, these things are not going to make a huge difference.

The third aspect of the legislation is the commitment and the statements in the budget. There was a major logjam in the Executive for months over the financial provisions and the budget issues, and that is why it is welcome that we are trying to progress the matter. Many Departments suffered greatly because of that blockade: health waiting lists rocketed; road and other infrastructure maintenance and development almost came to a standstill; and care for the elderly and vulnerable was greatly diminished, which everyone feels very sorry about, particularly if they are a carer and did not have help and support because of a political logjam.

Again, I come back to the issue of sanctions. We have heard about the sanctions regarding the pledge of office and the undertakings. What will be the sanction if the budget or financial undertakings are not lived up to? There does not appear to be any sanction mechanism for those who deliberately hold up the process and prevent everyone else from getting the benefit of a financial deal.

I welcome the progress that has been made, but only time will confirm whether the proposals deliver on the issues of terrorism, commitments by elected representatives and commitments on budgetary and financial resolutions.

Ian Paisley: The hon. Gentleman should be personally congratulated for the legal case he brought, where sanctions were imposed on someone who tweeted evil about him and the gallant organisation he was a member of—the Ulster Defence Regiment. He has demonstrated that, where there is a legal remedy, that is sometimes the best sanction.

Tom Elliott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Obviously, that is still rumbling on, but we got a sanction of some degree. I hope that the Assembly or this House can provide sanctions in this legislation. Like many others, I will await the outcomes and the outworkings of what is proposed here. As hon. Members will appreciate, I have some concerns about the outworkings of some of the proposals, and particularly about the sanctions, but I give the Bill a fair wind at this stage.

8.3 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I am delighted to participate in this Second Reading debate. I offer my condolences to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) following the bereavement of his staff member. I also offer my condolences to my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) following his family’s bereavement last night.

In its generality, the Bill deals with trying to eradicate paramilitarism. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell), I want to emphasise not only my party’s consistent support for political and economic stability throughout Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland, but, above all, our unequivocal opposition to all forms of paramilitarism, whether it comes from republican or loyalist paramilitaries. Paramilitarism, and what it fed and spawned, created not only instability but fear. It was like a cancer running throughout our society.

There were also other issues. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) referred to the murder of six innocent men in Loughinisland on 18 June 1994. That is a night I will never forget, because two people who were murdered that night were directly related to relatives of mine—one was an uncle and another was a cousin. In that respect, therefore, I know the character of those people, and their only political act on any occasion was to register their vote. Never by word or
deed did they undertake any form of paramilitary activity, but they died at the butt of a gun, and their bodies were strewn over a pub.

I would therefore say to the Secretary of State that her comments on 11 February were in some ways unfair, because at the moment the independent police ombudsman is undertaking, and near the completion of, another inquiry into what happened in Loughinisland on that night and why it happened. Were there elements of collusion between the then RUC and those who perpetrated those awful crimes on that night, robbing the community that I represent and, above all, that I live in of six good people and irrevocably changing our community, not because what happened moved people towards violence in any form, but because it left them in a state of fear, in a community that had never known any form of violence before? I urge the Secretary of State in that respect to be particularly careful, because her words on 11 February could be construed as trying to obfuscate that inquiry by the police ombudsman, which is near completion. That is the second inquiry, because the previous ombudsman’s inquiry was inconclusive and, in many ways, could be perceived as being deliberately inconclusive.

Lady Hermon: I am listening carefully to the hon. Lady’s comments, and I have huge regard for her. I would just like her to put on record this evening her gratitude to the RUC, which stood between the whole community of Northern Ireland and absolute mayhem through more than 30 years of appalling violence. Three hundred and two RUC officers paid the ultimate price with their lives. I am sure she would like to put on record this evening her gratitude to the RUC through the awful years of the troubles.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. We were always opposed to the murder of members of the security forces, whether those security forces were the RUC, the UDR or the Army. We saw what that did to those people and to their families. That murder and that paramilitarism against members of the security forces was totally unacceptable; we condemned it at the time, and we will always condemn it—we are very clear about that. Let me move on to other issues.

There is a clear need to ensure that economic stability is embedded in Northern Ireland, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said when he referred to issues to do with corporation tax and the loss of jobs last week at Bombardier in the constituency of the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and other job losses. The most important thing is to ensure that existing economic stability in Northern Ireland is protected. What better way to do that, I say again, than through continued membership of the European Union, because we have a ready export market in the south of Ireland and are also able to trade with the wider Common Market? I ask the Secretary of State to reflect on her position in that respect.

Moving on to elements of the Bill, clause 1(4) deals with the independent reporting commission, to which the First Minister and Deputy First Minister can nominate two persons. I suggest that there should be a legislative input for the Justice Department, despite the character of the independent reporting commission. It could be argued that any Northern Ireland nominations should be made by the Executive as a collective body, or chosen from proposals made by parties. The issues that fall to the independent reporting commission brought the parties together in September last year, because they refer directly to the murders of Gerard Davison in the first week in May last year and of Kevin McGuigan in August. Both people resided in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South.

During the negotiations—I am sure that the Secretary of State and the Minister will recall this—we in the SDLP circulated papers to the three Governments and all parties on a whole-enforcement approach and a whole-community approach on how to address the issues of paramilitarism. Despite fresh start being designed and managed to be a two-party deal, there should have been all-party work on IRC membership. How can the work and the mandate of the IRC, which includes Dublin representatives, be reconciled with Sinn Féin’s approach to Tom Murphy from South Armagh? I would like to press the Secretary of State on precisely how much new moneys are to be made available to the National Crime Agency and the PSNI, when those moneys will be released, and how they will be split between the National Crime Agency and the PSNI.

Clause 2(3)(a) deals with national security, which was referred to by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley. Paramilitarism and criminality are therefore to be addressed, but unfortunately the British Government can invoke national security, and that allows for the protection of agents who have information, thereby impeding work on the resolution of many cases.

Clause 6(1) deals with institutional reform. Yes, 14 days before the appointment of Ministers is okay, but fresh start refers to a proposal that parties have to agree to go into the Executive before the programme for government is finally agreed. Have the Government contemplated any amendment to this proposition? The pledge of office for Ministers states that they must “support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed and... support all efforts to uphold it.” How can this be reconciled with Sinn Féin’s view on the National Crime Agency? The NCA is a vehicle for the rule of law, yet in February 2015 Sinn Féin opposed a motion in the Assembly that proposed support in word and deed, and refused to endorse it at a recent meeting of the Policing Board. How does the new pledge address Sinn Féin’s approach to Mr Murphy? The same applies to the pledge of office for Assembly Members.

In the Stormont House talks, and in our submissions to those talks, we have made the point time and again that capricious or divided political messages on paramilitarism exacerbate the challenges facing people trying to move community transitions and graduations away from ingrained paramilitary interests. A genuinely united political stance from all parties in the Assembly is imperative if we are to enable statutory agencies and community groups to challenge ongoing paramilitary activity, which should be condemned outright from whatever quarter it comes. For that reason, the ministerial pledge of office and the undertaking by Assembly Members are welcome, but further clarification is required.

One element of the pledge, in particular, requires further scrutiny: the reference in the pledge of office and the undertaking by MLAs to their duty “to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism”.

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Will the Secretary of State or the Minister provide some clarification on that? Rooting out paramilitarism is not an overnight process, and scope has to be allowed for transition, but that cannot apply to illegal or untoward activity by paramilitary groups, or manifest itself as respect or tolerance for different classes of paramilitary behaviour. As MPs representing Northern Ireland constituencies, we have seen many examples of paramilitary activity.

As I said in my intervention on the Secretary of State, I regret the fact that there has been no legislative addressing of the legacy issues that need to be dealt with—the victims and the past. I urge that such legislation be introduced and that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle said, it is subjected to detailed scrutiny by this House, because we owe that to all the victims and all those who have suffered so terribly as a result of such heinous violence that was never asked for and never called for.

In the outworkings of all these agreements, we must try to achieve political and economic stability, because that is what we all strive for and all want to see. For the betterment of all our constituents and all the citizens of Northern Ireland, we must ensure that social justice is provided for and that inequalities that have been inherent across the community for some years are totally addressed. We must also ensure that we see the sustaining of existing jobs and the provision of new jobs through the building up of small and medium-sized enterprises, but also jobs through foreign direct investment. I ask the Secretary of State and the Minister to work with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that this comes about.

8.18 pm  

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I join my right hon. and hon. Friends and colleagues in acknowledging the presence of the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), who is diligent as the Chair of the Select Committee. He has suffered a close personal loss in the untimely death of Mark Calway and he has the sympathy of all of us. I also acknowledge the message of sympathy from my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), which I will pass on to my sister.

This Bill takes forward aspects of what has been called the fresh start agreement. I said at the time that an undue amount of political Febreze had been attached to that particular agreement, because it was not as widely agreed as the photograph on the front of Library briefing paper for this Bill would suggest. It implies that all the parties were agreed, but we and the Alliance party have made it clear that we see most of the agreement as being between Sinn Féin, the Democratic Unionist party and the British and Irish Governments.

That does not mean that the rest of us did not make significant contributions to the discussions. My hon. Friend is right to point out that, while other parties said a lot in front of the cameras about how the issue of paramilitarism had to be brought to a head, mine was the only party to make substantive contributions, on paper, on how to progress. We suggested a whole enforcement approach, because many parties and people believed that a blind eye was being turned to different levels of criminal activity and that bye-balls were being given to particular people. There was a feeling that the Governments were happy to allow some crime to continue, essentially on the basis that it related to personal assets. Even if those assets and criminal activities derived from former paramilitary activities and associations, they were somehow deemed not to be political any more.

When we asked the relevant authorities about those assets and activities in the past, we were told that they were being treated as personal and family issues, not as political or organisational matters. Many parties have raised that issue and it has been discussed in previous debates in this House, including by some hon. Members sitting behind me. It relates to fuel laundering, various aspects of smuggling and, indeed, environmental crime, which involves significant quantities of illegal and hazardous waste. Clearly, there are vestiges of former paramilitary associations and a hangover or nexus of certain paramilitary groups or people who were formerly associated with such groups.

Although we advocated a whole enforcement approach, I acknowledge that both Governments were adamant in the negotiations that no blind eye was being turned and that all the relevant agencies, both individually and collectively, were pursuing everything possible. The Governments accepted, however, that perhaps there needed to be even more visibility and that they needed to be more vocal. That is why the commitments emphasise the role of the cross-border taskforce and similar efforts.

We also advocated a whole community approach, because that is what is needed if the north is going to achieve a wholesome society free of all the abnormalities of paramilitary traces and the other divisions that are a hangover of the past. In fact, our paper said:

“Political parties ought to be showing coherent and consistent shared standards which recognise and repudiate nefarious paramilitary interests and involvements. This should reflect a shared approach which is about rooting out paramilitarism and its trace activities, not just singling out particular groups or given parties.

Parties should unite in adhering to a whole-community approach to achieving a wholesome community free of sectarianism, communal division and vicious vestiges of ongoing paramilitarism. A whole community approach should entail more than challenging paramilitary practices or presences in our own constituency or highlighting them in someone else’s. It should mean that we all see pernicious paramilitary activity in any corner of the north as an affront to the wholesome democratic society we should want as this generation’s legacy to the next.

Deep cleansing the spectrum of residual orbits and habits of paramilitarism should be a key dimension in any programme for cohesion, sharing and integration in a healthily united community.

The converse is also pertinent. We cannot eradicate the recurrence of, or recourse to, paramilitarism in given settings without overcoming divisions, tensions, apprehensions and grievances which paramilitaries convert to their own utility.”

In calling for that whole community approach, we posited the idea of parties making new declarations and suggested something along the lines of the Mitchell principles or the Nolan principles of public life. We wanted every party to make meaningful pledges and to adhere to clear commitments, but, as my hon. Friend has said, the Bill does not provide for that. There is no guarantee that the representatives of all the parties will unite around and adhere to any pledge. Instead, the Bill adds to the pledge of office for Ministers and creates a parallel pledge for Members of the Legislative Assembly.
Whenever there have been controversies regarding whether parties have been consorting or engaging with paramilitaries, the allegation has related not just to MLAs or Ministers, but to councillors. Are councillors not bound by the standards of the pledge in the same way as they are to their commitment to non-violence? We are debating this proposed legislation, so should it not also apply to MPs, or are they free of the standards? They apply to MLAs and to Ministers, but not to others. We need a more articulate approach than the pledges as they appear in the Bill.

The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is right to point out that there is no way of enforcing or arbitrating with regard to any dispute or controversy. That applies not just to the pledge taken by MLAs; it applies very directly to the pledge of office taken by Ministers, because there is no means of arbitrating on alleged breaches of the ministerial code. The Executive have no means of doing that. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister have still not suggested a clear way of investigating and making judgments on alleged breaches of the ministerial code. People can take each other to court alleging breaches of the ministerial code, but the Executive have no sensible, clear or credible mechanism to address the issue, even though that is what is needed.

A similar mechanism is also needed for the Assembly in order to decide whether an issue should go to the Committee on Standards and Privileges or elsewhere. It is not good enough to leave the decision to Standing Orders. The issue should be subject to a higher-order political decision, rather than be decided by the Assembly’s Committee on Procedures when it considers Standing Orders. That was the mistake made many years ago in the original Northern Ireland Act 1998. The provisions around the petition of concern in paragraphs 11 to 13 of the Good Friday agreement were very particular about how limited the use of petitions of concern was to be. Petitions of concern were to be used selectively in instances where people alleged that there had been a breach, or that there was an issue of human rights or equality. A mechanism would be set up on the basis of petitions of concern to test that issue, and then things would proceed.

Unfortunately, rather than providing for what was in the Good Friday agreement, the legislation simply stated that Standing Orders would provide for the devices that were mentioned in paragraphs 11 to 13. That was never done right, which is why we have the situation that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury complained about. We have a wide open, drive-by, veto-style petition of concern, which has been used on a tit-for-tat basis and often frivolously.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has made a strong point about the principles that should be in play in public life. Is there not a certain irony in the fact that his colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly have, alongside Sinn Féin, this evening signed a petition of concern to retain and enshrine religious discrimination in the selection of teachers in the Province?

**Mark Durkan:** My colleagues have signed a petition of concern against a current proposal. [Interruption.] It is a matter of trying to protect existing laws and not change them rashly before an election. The DUP has cited that in relation to other matters. It is about defending the existing equality provisions. What happens with a petition of concern should be what was decided under the Good Friday agreement. Rather than that being the end of the matter, it should be the subject of an investigation by a specially appointed committee to see what issues of rights and equality are involved, to test those issues and to allow the matter to proceed. That is how it should have been, as per the agreement. That has been our consistent position on how petitions of concern should properly be dealt with; they should not be abused as they have been.

I turn to the pledge of office by Ministers and the undertaking by Members of the Assembly. The commitment is confined to Ministers and Members of the Assembly, and does not extend to other party politicians. In addition, the pledge of office requires Ministers “to work collectively with the other members of the Executive Committee to achieve a society free of paramilitarism”.

I would hope that the Ministers’ commitment would extend much further than simply to working with their ministerial colleagues. Similarly, the commitment of Assembly Members should extend further than just to working with their Assembly colleagues.

There is also the question of what some of the terms mean. The hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) was right to point out the final sub-pledge in the pledge of office by Ministers and the undertaking by Assembly Members, which is “to accept no authority, direction or control on my political activities other than my democratic mandate alongside my own personal and party judgment”.

In the same pledge of office, Ministers pledge to be bound by decisions of the Assembly and the Executive Committee. The final sub-pledge appears to contradict that, so there is potential tension there. In addition, if we fill the gap that the hon. Member for North Down mentioned by creating clear standards and sanctions, people will have to accept some trammelling of their political conduct, because they will be listening to others as to what the due standards of behaviour and engagement should be. I think that there is a problem, which the hon. Member for Gedling was right to identify.

I want to take up the point that my hon. Friend the Member for South Down mentioned about the second to last of the sub-pledges, which is “to support those who are determined to make the transition away from paramilitarism”.

That might seem to be fair enough as a general statement of support, but what does it mean in practice? Are there potential tensions between that and other parts of the pledge, such as the commitment “to challenge paramilitary attempts to control communities” and “to challenge all paramilitary activity and associated criminality”?

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) earlier questioned whether some of the former paramilitary personalities who have talked a lot about their positive contribution to the peace process have been more laggardly in relation to certain standards and practices, and whether they have turned a blind eye to certain things.

The question therefore arises of whether or not, when we criticise or challenge such people, we will be accused of not supporting those who are determined to
make the transition away from paramilitarism. Many people use as a justification for their demands for funding for particular schemes—jobs for the boys, set-ups and all the rest of those things—that they are all about weaning people away from paramilitarism. Other people in the community sometimes challenge that by questioning why they were not interviewed for posts that had become available in community organisations or whatever, while other people were interviewed. We need to look at such issues.

We should remember the very glaring example involving my hon. Friend the Member for South Down. When she was a Minister, she decided to cease her Department’s funding of the conflict transformation initiative because the Chief Constable and other senior police officers made it very clear that those in the Ulster Defence Association, which was essentially funded and supported by the conflict transformation initiative, were up to their necks in a series of high-profile crimes. The Chief Constable made that clear, and high-profile criminal activity was taking place at the time. My hon. Friend brought that to the Executive, which told her she had to decide because it was a matter for her Department. However, when she made her decision, they changed their ideas. Members of other parties said, “Oh, no. The conflict transformation initiative is supporting people who are trying to make the transition away from paramilitarism,” while as far as others were concerned, the money was going to support and indulge people who were up to their necks in crime at that time. Which was it?

There are potential tensions in how any of us might interpret the pledge and the undertaking in clauses 7 and 8. We could take them in very different directions, so work is needed to refine them and define them better. We must also ensure that somebody else can arbitrate, because otherwise there will be a lot of arguments between the parties on such issues. The one thing we do not want is for parties to end up arguing with each other about who opposes aspects of paramilitarism either now or historically. The more united and coherent the parties can be seen to be, the better.

We want to make sure that that applies at all levels to resolve many of the existing issues. If there are controversies about party politicians turning up at particular events or protests that paramilitaries are also attending, we need to be able to deal with such issues. We must ensure that the pledge governs what happens when there are other controversies, such as the naming of the play park that has often been mentioned in this Chamber. It should be clear that we have an absolutely coherent pledge relating to paramilitary practices, either historical or current, and that we all have the same yardstick. That would provide protection for all individual politicians put under pressure at community level to get involved in this, that or the other, or to lend their presence to an event. A proper, articulate and robust pledge could give us a lot in that respect.

There are other issues about the Bill that I want to mention, before I touch on what is not in it. As hon. Members have said, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will appoint members of the independent reporting commission. In the fresh start agreement the reference was to the Executive, but the Bill makes it clear and explicit that the power lies with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I share the view of other hon. Members that that needs to be the subject of wider consideration and consultation. There are also issues to consider about the Secretary of State’s powers in respect of the commission. The fact that the Secretary of State will be in charge of defining and possibly changing many interpretations means that more work and consideration is needed.

I want to make a few points about clause 9, which is about draft budgets. The Government say they have included the clause because they want to ensure greater transparency and sustainability in relation to the budget. I am all for transparency in budgets, as I was when I had the job of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. In various talks, the Social Democratic and Labour party has advocated going much further on budget transparency. As well as designing the whole procedure for a fairly transparent process of draft budgets that are fully considered in the Assembly, open to public consultation and then subject to the revised budget procedure, we have advocated in various talks, going right back to Leeds castle, the idea that after the revised budget is approved by the Assembly, each departmental Minister should, within a number of weeks, make a statement about their own spending plan and be fully answerable to the Assembly on how they will deliver it. We thought that that would add to the transparency, but it was not to the taste of many of the parties that were talking a lot about transparency. I remember Peter Robinson telling me, “We don’t want that much transparency—that would be just too much.” I think there should be transparency in how the Assembly follows up on budgets.

Under clause 9, a statement will be laid before the Assembly about the amount of UK funding to be allocated. Will the Secretary of State consider accepting an amendment to take that further by saying that the statement should specify exactly how the Northern Ireland Barnett allocation was calculated? That would allow people in the Assembly, and Members here, to see exactly how the spending amount for Northern Ireland had been determined on the basis of spending commitments here and, possibly, on the basis of legislation and legislative requirements that had gone through this place. We would be able to see whether the two correlated.

A key argument that the Scottish National party and my party made in relation to English votes for English laws was that England-only or England and Wales-only legislation that goes through this place will inform the spending plans for England or England and Wales, and will, in turn, be factored into the Barnett formula. Therefore, let us have transparency. The Government tried to tell us that no legislation has those sorts of spending consequences. That is funny, because the same Government usually say, when they reject amendments to Bills, that they are doing so because there would be budgetary consequences. So they will not take amendments to legislation because there would be budgetary consequences, but with English votes for English laws they pretend that legislation does not have budgetary consequences.

The Government might be right, or we might be right. The way to prove who is right and to establish the facts in the future is to take the transparency provision a bit further. It should not be hard to colour in the budget statement a bit more. Rather than being just a
brief outline statement, it should be well coloured in, whether in respect of the draft budget or the subsequent statement that comes with the revised budget. If people want transparency, that would be a good addition to the Bill.

There is a question over whether one intention behind the statement is that it can be used, in effect, as a budget cap. The Government say that it is about transparency and sustainability. However, when the Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Bill was debated, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said that the switch-on power would be activated only when the Treasury was satisfied that there was a balanced and sustainable budget. Some of us asked in the Bill Committee whether the Treasury would use that power to make a judgment on the spending plans of the Executive in relation to other matters, such as student finance, water charges or prescription charges. After all, the Treasury was using the Assembly’s failure to pass the welfare reform legislation to make the judgment that there was not a balanced and sustainable budget. The Financial Secretary said, “We will judge a budget on the sum of its parts.” He did not rule out the Government using the power to involve themselves in those other matters.

One reason why I welcome the provisions of clause 9 on draft budgets is that they settle a point that arose after the Assembly budget in 2008, when Peter Robinson was the Minister for Finance and Personnel. We tried to amend that budget and the programme for government, and we voted against aspects of it. A few months later, Peter Robinson announced that because the budget had contained indicative figures for 2009 and 2010, draft budgets did not need to be tabled before the Assembly in the subsequent years. The procedures that were laid down in the 1998 Act were clearly predicated on an annual financial exercise, but he said that he had received legal advice that the requirement for that exercise before each financial year had been discharged by covering the figures for all three years in the 2008 budget.

We challenged that at the time and took it to the Speaker of the Assembly. Unfortunately, he did not rule but said it was up to us to make a legal challenge. The flaky advice given by Peter Robinson was followed by that of his successor as Minister of Finance and Personnel, the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds), who said that the draft budget exercise was not needed. Clause 9 is clear that it will be an annual exercise. There is absolutely no ambiguity or doubt in how it is framed: it is an annual exercise. A draft budget has to be tabled and debated fully every year, with an additional statement made ahead of it. We are glad that that is set out in the Bill. It may restore the Assembly’s role in transparency, which needs to be amplified. The Assembly should be doing much more scrutiny of budgets and spending; that should not just be left to bodies outside the Assembly.

Members have raised issues not covered in the Bill, and the Secretary of State, in her opening remarks, addressed issues relating to legacy. Like my colleagues, I regret that, rather than our ending up with an all-party agreement, welfare reform was agreed by the three amigos of Sinn Féin, the Tories and the DUP—the austerity alliance. This Bill is now being brought forward, and we await the legacy legislation. It is important that it is not rushed. It is also important that we give some issues full consideration again. I recognise that the Secretary of State thinks the measure of agreement apparent around the table at Stormont House was the highest degree of agreement there has been. I would make the point, however, that Eames-Bradley offered a much better prospectus for dealing with the past. So did the Haass proposals, although not as good as Eames-Bradley. They were watered down in the Stormont House agreement, and they have been watered down further in a number of respects.

Victims’ groups have their own concerns, upsets and apprehensions about some of the issues involved. I ask them, and all parties, to consider all the issues in the round, not least with respect to the potential to deal with what have now been called “thematics”. It is hugely important that the historical investigations units is set up to undertake the work formerly done by the Historical Enquiries Team and the work on the past done by the police ombudsman, but we should recognise that the HIU will be confined to looking at killings. We should also recognise that it will work, a bit like the HET, on the basis of reports being provided to the families. Those reports will then be treated as the private property of the families.

Many cases, however, are linked. There are wider patterns, themes and issues at stake, not all of which relate to killings, and many of them need to be scrutinised and given an airing. In many ways, we think that would help to answer some of the questions put by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley. He says that there is an unbalanced approach to the past, and that those who are seeking the truth and want the past to be investigated are concentrating entirely on what the state did and not on what paramilitary actors did. The whole question of thematics and patterns in those investigations could lead to more balance, which is why we in the SDLP in particular put such emphasis on that.

I recall that in the Haass negotiations, Richard Haass himself replied to points that the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley made about a failed market in relation to the past, whereby people with the means and the motives were pursuing the aspects of the past that interested them, while others were being left aside. He argued that thematics was one way of evening the situation up and ensuring that other pictures and other concerns were looked at.

Lady Hermon: Before the hon. Gentleman concludes his remarks—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Despite the noises off, I want to take this opportunity to express on behalf of my colleagues and friends how very sorry we are to hear that he has had a bereavement in his extended family. We would be most grateful if he would offer to his sister our sympathy and support at a time when her partner was tragically killed in a traffic accident last night. We are very sorry indeed that death has visited her door and the hon. Gentleman’s door at such an untimely stage of life.

Mark Durkan: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind condolences, which I will certainly pass on. I accept them in the spirit in which she has shared them—not just on her own behalf but on behalf of her colleagues as well. Of course, whenever we experience the shock of death like that, it comes as a throwback. I did not know what had happened when I spotted the tapes across the road and the police action that was going on; it looked like a security operation that would have been familiar to so many of us down the years. In talking to the police
at the scene. I had memories of other occasions, which brought to mind once again the position that we are all talking about, from our different party stances, when we deal with the concerns of victims and survivors about the past. This is why we need to give the issue full consideration now.

When the legacy legislation comes forward, we must ensure that it is going to be fit for the needs and purposes of victims and survivors. We must listen to them, and think a little more about what they say. I hope that the sort of consensus that the Secretary of State says she wants to build will not be one in which she just tries to square things off between herself and one or two other parties. It must be done much more widely.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell) has said, we will bring forward amendments on some of the issues that I have mentioned, in an attempt to proof and improve the Bill. We are obviously not opposed to its passage, because we need the changes that it makes, for instance to the timeline for the appointment of Ministers, and we need to allow a programme for government to be aired and shared before Ministers are appointed. If that is to happen in time for the mandate of the next Assembly, the Bill will have to go through. We are certainly not throwing any spanners in the works in respect of the timing, but we want to try to improve the Bill and make good some of the gaps and wrinkles in it.

Even in respect of the limited things the Bill does, we think more could have been done. Why should the First Minister and Deputy First Minister remain the singular appointments of two parties? Why not revert to the original Good Friday agreement principle of electing the First Minister and Deputy First Minister? Sinn Féin and the DUP no longer have a problem in going through the Lobbies together. They could not do so originally in 2007 when devolution was restored, which is why the whole system of appointing the First and Deputy First Minister had to be changed, but now that they can do that and now that they are happy to be an axis and be in a power pact, there is absolutely no reason why they should not. The First and Deputy First Ministers should be mandated by the Assembly. We have tried to secure such an amendment to other Bills. I do not know whether we will try it with this Bill, because we may concentrate more on the matters that are in it than those that are not.

8.54 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Second Reading debates are often described as timely, well-informed and apposite, and occasionally that is true. Tonight we have heard an excellent Second Reading debate, featuring first-class contributions from all corners of the Chamber.

Let me associate myself, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), with the expressions of sympathy for the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) on the death of Mark Calway, whom many of us knew. The hon. Gentleman has sustained that loss with great forbearance and courage, and he has the sympathy of the House, as has the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) for a family bereavement that I hope we can all bear with him, while expressing our sympathy and condolences.

One constant theme ran throughout tonight’s debate, and I am delighted to say that, for once on these occasions, it was a theme of optimism. This was a serious and a sober debate, but at every stage there was that chink of light, that chance of hope, that good news, and that commitment to a better, shared future. That is what we heard from Members of every party, and I think it was one of the most important things that we heard.

The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) observed—rather flatteringly, I suppose—that we were represented more in quality than in quantity tonight, but many more people beyond the Chamber are watching us tonight and following our deliberations, and many will be noting, with admiration and gratitude, that we are moving on in Northern Ireland: moving on to a better and a shared future. This may not be the most important piece of legislation that has ever been dealt with on the Floor of the House, but it is an essential, crucial building block in that wall, that architecture, that structure of the peaceful Northern Ireland to which we all aspire. I have been greatly impressed by the quality, and the determination, of the comments that have been made tonight.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock)—above and beyond the call of duty—presented herself on the Front Bench tonight despite suffering from something approaching laryngitis. May I suggest a certain marvellous distillation? It is available both in Ireland and in Scotland—although we tend to spell it correctly in Ireland—and it is available to the hon. Lady on request. Whether she has already been able to avail herself of a small nip I cannot say, but I can say that, as a prophylactic against such throat conditions, it is admirable and well recommended. It is also a very, very powerful curative factor.

The right hon. Member for Belfast North rightly said that this was only part of the implementation of the Stormont House agreement. Throughout his speech and others, we were privileged—we were almost blessed—to hear some extraordinarily incisive interventions from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), although I have to say that her suggestion that the IPSA empire should be extended to Northern Ireland is a tad controversial. We may need to discuss it at some later stage.

I also want to associate myself, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, with the right hon. Gentleman’s comments about Peter Robinson. We do not give people enough credit on the Floor of the House for the work that they do. People often achieve great things and then move off the stage—perhaps to return; who knows?—and sometimes we neglect to thank and give credit to them. Not for the first time, the right hon. Gentleman did absolutely the right thing, and I think that all Members will wish to associate themselves with his comments.

We heard from the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) about how things have moved on from the days of the bonfires, and we heard an extraordinarily sobering—as if sobering were needed—comment from the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson). Sometimes, when we debate Northern Ireland business on the Floor of the House, we forget the full scale and extent of the seriousness of the subject that we are debating. The right hon. Gentleman referred to the deaths—more than 3,600—that occurred during
the troubles, but let it never be forgotten that more people have died by their own hand since the Good Friday agreement than died during the troubles. It is that serious; it is that sobering. The work that we do here today must always be done in the context of the facts, the realities, of the existence—still—of a legacy that is so horrific that it is sometimes almost impossible to absorb its full strength. Those suicide figures, which are very seldom publicised, are utterly bone-chilling. Every time any of us feel that we are somehow flagging in our determination to drive forward the peace process in Northern Ireland, we must never forget that it did not end with the Good Friday agreement and that the problems still exist today.

We heard a wonderful speech, not for the first time, from the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie). Having considered her comments at great length, I have decided that, yes, I agree with her that I think we should certainly stay in the EU for many reasons. She was so right yet again to refer to the troubles and the victims.

It is interesting that we strayed far and wide, and occasionally we pushed the envelope of direct relevance, and certainly when we did move out, particularly in a wide-ranging, horizon-scanning speech by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), we trespassed in some of the byways and burreens of the debate which I had not anticipated we would be discussing. However, in one of the other interventions of the hon. Member for North Down, she referred to clause 8 and particularly the proposed new section 40A on the undertaking by members. I say to the House, and particularly the Secretary of State, that I do not think we have heard the last of this. I appreciate that it is Stormont business, but it is legislation on the Floor of this House today and it will be legislation in Committee stage on the Floor of this House. I suspect that clause 8, and particularly proposed new section 40A (1)(b), will come back to us to be discussed later.

This is one of the very few Northern Ireland debates that has not been blessed by a pithy and apposite contribution from either the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) or the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), and I confess to a feeling of some frustration and sadness, particularly as I enjoyed the company of both hon. Gentlemen in what was a cracking good night in the Elim Pentecostal church hall in Ards the week before last, where I have to say the orange juice flowed like—well, it flowed like orange juice. We had an absolutely brilliant evening, showing that we did not need artificial stimulation and there exists in the heart of Ards a wonderful community which I had not previously been that much aware of. But it was such a pleasure to actually be able to be speaking while both of them sat and had to listen.

This has been an excellent Second Reading debate and we will move into Committee next week. There will be more discussion, but let us not forget what I said right at the beginning: the leitmotif throughout this whole debate—the one consistent golden thread that has run through it—is a golden thread of optimism, and I give credit to every single person who has participated in the debate here tonight and so many of those outside this Chamber who have contributed. I look forward to the full implementation of the fresh start agreement and the Stormont House agreement as another step on the road to that shared peaceful future to which we all aspire.

9.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who in every debate is optimistic and positive, and it is especially welcome that in what is, effectively, another stage of the Stormont House agreement and the fresh start agreement, we find ourselves in this Second Reading with the full support of Her Majesty’s Opposition. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and all those on the Opposition Front Bench for their continued support for making sure that we move Northern Ireland onwards to normalisation and ensure any bumps in the road that we have experienced are sorted out to allow the Northern Ireland political settlement to bed in and move forward so that the people there can take hold of the opportunities on offer.

With the leave of the House, I would like to respond to some of the points raised in the debate. I reiterate the importance of this Bill in the implementation of November’s fresh start agreement as a whole, as well as of the specific provisions, including those that give effect to the independent reporting commission and increase fiscal transparency in the Executive’s budget-setting process.

Paramilitary activity has been a blight on Northern Ireland society and is an issue which the UK Government, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive will tackle together. The measures in this Bill will create an independent body that will report on the progress made towards ending paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland once and for all.

The draft budget measure achieves what was set out in the fresh start agreement, and it will ensure that the Executive cannot consider spending plans that exceed the block grant allocated from the Treasury.

Let me respond to some points raised by hon. Members. I join others in sending condolences to the family of Mark Calway, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) understands that we are here to support him and the family of Mark Calway in their loss. We are also incredibly grateful for the forensic support—if I can put it that way—that his Committee gives to Northern Ireland politics and Government policy. We know that pragmatic, forensic examination of our policies, and those of other people, will help build that trust in Northern Ireland.

I say to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) that as a former Member of the Scottish Parliament I know the internal workings of devolution, and some measures in the Bill that the SNP supports would not necessarily have been right for it in Scotland. However, I know that the SNP supports such measures for the reasons that the hon. Lady eloquently articulated, which are to try to move Northern Ireland forward and achieve a settlement that will allow people to put the troubles behind them.

I pay tribute to the DUP. The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) articulated his tribute to the former First Minister, without whose actions we would not be discussing this Bill today, or indeed the previous Bill. I am grateful for the support that the DUP has given to the Government throughout this process, to try to resolve some of the issues that led to that impasse last year.
[Mr Ben Wallace]

I am also grateful for the positive attitude and speeches by DUP Members, and the support that they have provided to allow an LCM to be put in place swiftly. Such determination by the Executive and the First Minister to deal with those issues in Stormont means that I am incredibly optimistic about Northern Ireland and how it will progress, and I hope that the bumps that appeared in the road when I was first appointed to this post are put behind us so that we move forward, deal with the paramilitary past, and hopefully stop such things in the future. We must also grasp with both hands the opportunities and economic challenges that are presented.

I hear the issues about legacy raised by the hon. Member for Belfast South (Dr McDonnell), and we all want to solve them. In the past few weeks and months my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, the Minister for the Armed Forces and I met the Lord Chief Justice, and the Minister of Justice, the Deputy First Minister and the First Minister of Northern Ireland. Everyone is united in trying to get to a position where we can deal with the legacy of the past and move forward, and the Treasury has agreed to a package of funding—£150 million—to do that. However, we cannot just impose that £150 million on an unreformed system. We are all trying to work together to produce a long-term solution, not a short-term solution.

The phrase “national security” is often bandied about as if somehow it is being used as an unreasonable block on progress. Throughout the troubles, informers, neighbours, workmates, and ordinary members of the public helped the security forces against people who intimidated their own communities. It was not just informers; it was everybody. It was people who did not agree with violence. They might not have been Unionists; they might have been nationalists. Not only do those people deserve our protection, but we have a duty to protect them. Without their information and helpful tip-offs, without the confidentiality hotline being used, and without people in the heart of those communities saying, “We don’t stand for violence and we want an end to paramilitary bullying”, we would not have reached the end of the troubles. When people bandy around the phrase “national security” as some throwaway line, we should remember that at the heart of this is the need to protect those people and provide the duty of protection that we owe them. Without them, more blood would have been shed on the streets of Northern Ireland, and we should not forget the role that they played.

Mark Durkan: Does the Minister agree that when investigating the past, the police ombudsman has always respected such matters fully? It has never breached or compromised anybody’s interest in that regard, so surely others could be trusted to adhere to the same standard?

Mr Wallace: Everyone is entrusted with the powers that they are granted. National security does not just cover the actions of the PSNI; it covers the actions of the security services and of a range of people involved in trying to ensure that our society is safe and secure. We should remember that national security is not taken lightly. It is open to scrutiny by our Intelligence and Security Committee in this House, by the ombudsman and by the courts. The coroner and the judges often make the final decisions on many of these issues and they see the full facts, so it is important to remember that national security is about protecting life and people.

The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott) is absolutely right about the financial provisions. To enable a stable and secure budget to go forward, it is incredibly important to allow everyone in the Assembly to have a role in producing a budget and delivering services for better governance and better services for the people in Northern Ireland. The extension from seven to 14 days for the appointment of Ministers is absolutely a good example of making Government work better. We are delighted that as a Government we can ensure that that is put in place.

Let me reply to the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan) on the definition of paramilitary and paramilitary activity. In our view, that should be left to the commission to decide. It would be hard in a piece of primary legislation to prescribe—and it is the Government’s view that it is not for us to do so—how the four commissioners and the commission should look at paramilitary activity.

I hear the comments made by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) about paramilitaries leaving the stage. When I hear that comment, I often think I would not like to be in the green room at that time. There is no place for paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, and there never has been. We must make sure that there never is in the future.

I welcome the right hon. Gentleman’s support for the Bill and his observations. Of course, the independent reporting commission will also cover paramilitary activity in the south, in Ireland, and that is incredibly important. I know that the people of Ireland will take note of that. The Garda, who have been incredibly supportive over the years in ensuring that cross-border activity is countered, know that all this will be effective between the north and the south, which is something that we will focus on.

The right hon. Gentleman made a powerful point, and it is important that we should be clear about it. It was INLA, IPLO, the IRA, the UVF, the Red Hand Commando and the UDA that killed innocent people on the streets of Northern Ireland and on the mainland of the United Kingdom. No amount of innuendos, or selective leaks and salacious allegations, can change that fact. It does not wash away their guilt by trying to move it on. The narrative that has been growing is very dangerous for the history of Northern Ireland, because the reality is that it was those groups that chose to go out on nights and kill people. It was those groups that planted the bombs. We will not let the alternative narrative be planted that somehow somebody else caused it and that they were therefore not guilty of what they did. We hear that, loud and clear.

Mark Durkan: On that basis, given that these organisations need to be rightly blamed and indicted for what they did, does the Minister now regret that the British Government for so long maintained the UDA’s status as a legal organisation and consistently refused to proscribe it?

Mr Wallace: If memory serves, the UDA was proscribed in 1992. I was not in this House and I was not privy to the work of Government. In fact, in 1992 I was walking around west Belfast. As for the idea that I can condemn or support the ruling, all I know is that when I was
serving in Northern Ireland, I was grateful that the UDA was proscribed. I was grateful that the UVF was proscribed, and the Red Hand Commando. Any paramilitary organisation should be proscribed. Not only should any organisation that uses fear, terror and bullying be proscribed, but the people who take part should be convicted.

To the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) I say that we in this House should not forget the SDLP’s long-standing opposition to paramilitary intimidation. Very often, the SDLP bore the brunt of that intimidation. All the parties in this House have experienced at first hand intimidation by paramilitaries, either within the communities that they represented or in the neighbouring communities that sought to keep them out. I pay tribute to that long-standing commitment to peace and the democratic process. We do not forget that, but I say again that we should not take the issues of national security lightly.

On the legacy issues, as I have said earlier, all of us are trying our best. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly has meetings with the victims community to make sure they feel we are doing our best. We are going to get there. We are going to try to resolve this, and that will happen—we hope—as soon as we can all get agreement.

Vernon Coaker: May I just press the Minister once more on this issue? He mentions dealing with the legacy of the past. I asked the Secretary of State, but I want to be clear about this because a number of questions have arisen throughout this interesting and good debate. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State look again at releasing some of the funding that the Treasury and the Government have put aside for dealing with legacy issues to fund the PSNI and the coroner service to deal with some of these issues which were supposed to be dealt with by other institutions? Because of the inability to come to an agreement, the PSNI and the coroner service have been left to deal with them but not been given the resources to tackle them. Will the Minister re-examine that?

Mr Wallace: Absolutely, we will support any measures that deal with the legacy, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said. We cannot just release the money; we need all the actors on the stage to produce the solution. We need the victims, the PSNI, the courts, the Lord Chief Justice and the Executive to support the solution. If we were just to release money but nobody else was supporting the schemes or the coroners’ courts changes, for example, we would not necessarily solve the issue. We will look with all seriousness and all support at any proposals to solve the legacy issues.

The good news is that we have the Treasury’s agreement for the sum in principle, which is half the battle, as anybody who has ever been in government will know—£150 million is there. That means that the gap between getting the money and delivering it is simply a matter of getting an agreement between all the significant stakeholders in Northern Ireland. We are all determined to do that and it is one of our priorities. We are all trying to get there and we will work with all parties in Northern Ireland to try to do it.

Ms Ritchie: I referred to the split of moneys between the National Crime Agency and the PSNI. Would it be possible for the Minister to follow that up in writing to me?

Mr Wallace: I thank the hon. Lady for reminding me of something: £28 million has been allocated for tackling paramilitary activity. As far as I understand it, how that is divided is an operational decision about who needs it and where it should go. That sum has been allocated, and we think it is a step in the right direction in tackling paramilitary activity. If there is any more to tell her, I will certainly write to her.

In closing, I wish to remind the House that this Bill has the support of the Northern Ireland Executive. It will deliver on the UK Government’s commitment to the fresh start agreement and it plays a significant part in our efforts to support a stable and workable devolution settlement in Northern Ireland. I urge the House to support the Bill.

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

NORTHERN IRELAND (STORMONT AGREEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN) BILL (PROGRAMME) Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).
That the following provisions shall apply to the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill:
Committal
1. The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.
Proceedings at one day’s sitting
2. Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration, any proceedings in legislative grand committee and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at one day’s sitting in accordance with the following provisions of this Order.
Proceedings on Consideration and up to Third Reading
3. Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.
Proceedings on Third Reading
4. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.
Programming committee
5. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to other proceedings up to and including Third Reading.
Other proceedings
6. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—[Simon Kirby.]
Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND (STORMONT AGREEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN) 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 Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:
(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State; and
(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Simon Kirby.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

REFERENDUMS

That the draft European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 January, be approved.—(Simon Kirby.)

Question agreed to.

EDUCATION

Ordered,

That Caroline Nokes be discharged from the Education Committee and William Wragg be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS

Ordered,

That Tom Blenkinsop be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Vicky Foxcroft be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Emergency Tug Vessels (West Coast of Scotland)

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

9.20 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): We have heard much today in the debate on our future in or out of the European Union about the issue of our security. It is right that Parliament takes seriously its security responsibilities. As part of this debate, we need to take seriously our responsibilities for the marine environment.

It is worth recapping why we had emergency towing vessels. They were a response to Lord Donaldson’s 1994 report following the Braer oil spill off the coast of Shetland. Following that disaster, 86,000 tonnes of oil were released into the North sea. We got lucky to some extent in that the oil was largely dispersed. In other areas and in other circumstances, such an oil spill could be devastating. The ships were put in place to protect human and marine life following the Braer experience. It was right in 1994, and it remains right today. The desire to provide marine safety cannot come at the expense of a penny-pinching Government walking away from their responsibilities. It is a responsibility of this Government to maintain that protection.

The UK Government kept telling us during the Scottish referendum that we were better together. How can there be any shred of validity in that statement if the Government do not take seriously our marine safety? What price better together then? Our safety cannot be traded away on the desire to save costs in Westminster. If the Government compromise on safety, they compromise their legitimacy to govern.

In 2011, the UK Government announced the removal of the vessels, although there was a subsequent agreement to retain one vessel in Orkney. That vessel is now under threat of being removed next month. Sir Alan Massey, the chief executive officer of the Marine and Coastguard Agency, said in Edinburgh two weeks ago that, following a formal risk assessment, the removal of the ETV for the far north and west was unacceptable. I agree with Sir Alan. It was also unacceptable to remove the Stornoway vessel. If there is a risk in the Northern Isles, there is a risk in the west. Put simply, the Northern Isles vessel is too far away to respond quickly enough to any incidents off the west of Scotland.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. As one of the five Scottish National party Members for the highlands and islands, he will of course be aware that we have repeatedly called on the Government to address the maritime safety deficit caused by the removal of the Stornoway vessel in 2010-11. Does he agree that this cannot be done properly by having a single ETV based in Orkney alone? It is deeply worrying that the only existing ETV in Kirkwall is currently under threat. The position that we find ourselves in—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The hon. Gentleman’s intervention is very long. If Members keep their interventions brief, more Members can come in.
**Brendan O’Hara:** My last point is that the coast has been left vulnerable. Does my hon. Friend believe that the removal of the ETV at Kirkwall would be utterly unthinkable?

**Ian Blackford:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and he is quite correct. We cannot comprehend the possible risk of the loss of the vessel in Kirkwall. It is also true that there is no way in reasonable time that that vessel based in Kirkwall can get to Argyll and Bute or indeed to large parts of my constituency. We have been placed at an unacceptable level of risk. Does the Minister agree with the chief executive of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency that the removal of the Kirkwall-based vessel is unacceptable, and will he give the House an assurance that the Government will find the necessary funds to make sure that that vessel remains in place? That is a simple question, and it requires a simple yes or no answer.

Throughout Europe, the provision of emergency towing vessels is commonplace, for example in France, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands. It is good practice to protect your marine environment and coastal communities—we should do the same. The Netherlands put in place such a capability only in April 2014 to provide protection for shipping, the marine environment and their coastal communities. Many other countries see the sense in that, so why do the UK Government not accept their responsibilities? That is all we are asking.

There has been some chatter that perhaps, just perhaps, the Orkney vessel might be saved. That would be welcome—the threat should never have been there in the first place—but it does not go far enough, as my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) said. We need the reinstatement of the second vessel. I say to the Minister, do the right thing: deliver some good news, and put the two vessels back where they should be, in the Northern and Western Isles. Show us, Minister, that the Government take our safety seriously—do not leave us exposed to the threat of environmental disaster.

**Dr Paul Monaghan** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that on safety and on all the issues that you have highlighted, the UK Government need to take into account the fact that in the coming years there will be more than 200 movements of nuclear material from Dounreay, and some of that material will be transported by sea?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel):** Order. Before the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) continues, I remind Members that they should speak through the Chair. At the moment, Members are addressing one another directly, and I should be grateful if they addressed their comments through the Chair.

**Ian Blackford:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I agree with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan). I would argue that there is a wider point, because if we had responsibility for our marine environment in Scotland we would make sure that we had ships in place to protect our coastal community. Moreover, the unbelievable threat that we face from nuclear waste being moved by sea down the west coast of Scotland would certainly not be tolerated by an independent Scottish Government.

Let us think about the risks that we face on the west and north coasts of Scotland: extreme weather, treacherous coastlines and changing tidal patterns throughout the year. In those treacherous waters are general cargo boats and tankers, and there is even the threat of nuclear waste, as has been said. The thought of nuclear waste being transported down the west coast leaves me cold. The possibility of no emergency towing vessels being available horrifies me.

The need for such vessels was demonstrated clearly when two days after the announcement of the withdrawal of the vessels in 2011, the ship-towing vessel based at Stornoway was sent to the aid of a nuclear submarine, HMS Astute, which had run aground off Skye. We do not know whether Astute was carrying nuclear weapons—it is a moot point—but a nuclear sub colliding with the Isle of Skye was quite an incident. Who is to say such an event could not happen again? We need the security of an emergency towing vessel. I might add that the towing vessel would provide some security for us; a useless Trident nuclear submarine presents no security to the people of Scotland.

Where is the Government’s responsibility to my constituents—what will happen if there is another Braer, heaven forbid? We have learned that ETVs are not a statutory responsibility of the MCA and are not a budget priority. Even so, the MCA admits there is an increased risk if ETVs are not available. One almost could not make this up: there is acceptance of risk, but here is the rub, those of us in these far-off communities, well, we can take the risk—we are expendable. That is the message from this Government. Why should the Minister care? As a local MP, I care for my communities—I will fight for my communities—and I want the Government to take responsibility. What is the point of the MCA if such provision is not a statutory responsibility? Why will the Minister not make it a statutory responsibility?

Let me deal with the issue of vessels in the constituency of Ross, Skye and Lochaber. This wanton disregard for marine safety takes place at a time when the MCA is considering an application for ship-to-ship oil transfers in the Cromarty Firth. Here again, the Government seem to be coming up short in discharging their responsibilities to consult effectively and take environmental considerations seriously. It is environmental concerns that demonstrate the need for our marine safety to be taken seriously, and our communities need the comfort of knowing that emergency towing vessels are there as part of the Government’s responsibility.

The Scottish Government are responsible for marine safety yet, incredible as it sounds, we do not know whether Marine Scotland was consulted as part of the process. The application for the ship-to-ship transfer dated 5 November states that the MCA confirmed that the main consultees would be the local authorities. However, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, with the appropriate wildlife non-governmental organisations. There was no mention of Marine Scotland. Why not?

That is why I tabled a question to the Minister dated 9 February, which was answered on 15 February, stating that Marine Scotland was consulted. I have not been
able to clarify whether this was the case or not. Perhaps the Minister can do so this evening. Why was Marine Scotland not listed in the consultation document? Was it consulted? In the interests of transparency, will he publish any related correspondence?

I return to the clear need for ETVs both on the west coast of Scotland and in the north. I mentioned the Donaldson report from 1994. We also had the Belton report in 1995, which stated:

“Once a ship has irreparably broken down and is drifting towards the shore tugs represent the first and only line of defence.”

Well, that is pretty clear. We also need to examine the scale of the risk. The Minister has an issue with costs.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am pleased to see in this Parliament so many attending such a debate. In the previous Parliament, before SNP Members were so numerous, there would be very few Members at a debate such as this.

The UK Government are playing fast and loose because of an event that might happen once in 25 years, once in 50 years or once in 100 years. They have no insurance policy because they are a penny-wise, pound-foolish Government who are playing fast and loose with the Scottish coastline, which my hon. Friend and I represent and care about. If the UK Government respected Scotland and genuinely thought of the UK as a family of nations, they would step up to the mark now, instead of abdicating their responsibilities.

Ian Blackford: I thank my hon. Friend for that fine intervention. I look forward to hearing the Minister answering it, as we have not had an answer yet. Five of us went to see the Minister last November. We have been waiting quite some time for this Government to take their responsibilities seriously.

As I was saying, the Minister has an issue with costs. What the Government should be doing is looking imaginatively at making ETVs multifunctional in conjunction with other Government Departments to spread costs. There are many possibilities—for example, increased lighthouse dues, port dues or MCA inspection fees, as well as deploying the ETVs on other activities. Time does not allow a full exploration of potential revenue streams, but there are many opportunities for growing income.

In a letter to me and colleagues on 17 November last year, the MCA stated that there is no formal vessel traffic management system in the Northern and Western Isles region and that no mandatory reporting requirement exists in these areas. There is a voluntary reporting scheme. I find it remarkable that in this day and age we do not know what ships and what dangerous cargoes are afloat on our waters.

Be that as it may, the voluntary scheme showed that in the Northern Isles, the Pentland firth and the Fair Isle channel there were 81 tankers and 290 general cargo vessels over a 30-day period to 9 November last year. For the Minches and west of Lewis the respective figures were 66 tankers and 202 general cargo vessels. We are not talking about the odd cargo. As my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) said, whether it is a one-in-25-year or a one-in-50-year risk or even a one-in-100-year risk, these are risks that we cannot afford to take. That raises the issue of a mandatory reporting scheme, because we need to know exactly how many vessels are in our waters. The numbers I have given suggest that my communities need the protection that ETVs offer.

The same letter from 17 November lists the towage provided in the Northern and Western Isles since 2011. It includes, for example, an incident on 19 March 2012, when the MN Flinterspirit ran aground off North Uist. There is no ETV in the Western Isles, so the Orkney-based vessel was deployed, and the MN Flinterspirit was refloated. A month later, the Orkney ETV went to the aid of a fishing vessel that was on fire 50 miles from Orkney. On 7 April 2014, it went to the aid of MV Norholm, which had broken down off Cape Wrath.

More recently, the Orkney ETV went to the scene of the grounding of the MV Lysblink Seaways at Kilchoan, in Ardnamurchan. Interestingly, the report I have states that the location was well outside the ETV’s operational area, so there we have it: the MCA itself accepts that the vehicle in Orkney was not ideally situated to give succour to constituents in Ardnamurchan. Let us just dwell on that: the MCA concedes that the distance from Orkney is too great to offer security. If there is one thing that demonstrates the need to maintain one ETV in Orkney serving the Northern Isles and one serving the west coast, that is it. Are we just to sit back and hope for the best, or will the Government meet their responsibilities and provide security for the marine environment and our coastal communities?

Mr MacNeil: My hon. Friend asks a pertinent question. He says we do not know what boats are going up the west coast of Scotland at the moment. Actually, looking at a marine traffic app, we can see that an 11,000-tonne oil and chemical tanker is going up there just now—it is between South Uist and my hon. Friend’s home in Skye. There is no insurance policy for that boat travelling through the Minches, because of the UK Government’s negligence. He makes a salient point when he says that we do not know what is going up the west coast; in fact, we do, but the point is that the UK Government do not, because they are not looking at these apps, and they are not worried, because this is Scotland.

Ian Blackford: It is too far from Westminster. Why should they care? However, my hon. Friend makes an important point. The vessel that ran aground at Ardnamurchan—the Lysblink Seaways—was a general cargo vessel. Can we just stop and think for a minute about what would have happened if an oil vessel had run aground at Ardnamurchan? We should just think about the environmental damage that could have happened. We should think about the threat to the tourist industry in Ardnamurchan—this is a fragile economy that depends on tourism. We cannot accept that risk. The Government have to act to protect communities up and down the west and north coast of Scotland.

On 7 May 2015, the MV Industrial Kennedy broke down 94 miles north-west of Shetland and was towed to Lerwick. That and the other incidents I mentioned are just some of those in which the Orkney ETV was deployed. From my information, it appears that the ETV was deployed on 13 occasions between November 2011 and November 2015. That is a significant number of incidents. More importantly, however, we should remember that these vessels are required as an insurance policy, as my hon. Friend said.
Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I am just going to wind up.

Incidentally, the Costa Concordia, which was involved in a grounding with calamitous consequences in Italy, was in Orkney just before it was deployed to Italy—yet another warning of the need for an ETV.

The costs associated with these vessels are insurance against the much more significant costs to society of an environmental disaster from, for example, a significant oil spill resulting from a tanker grounding along our coastline. Providing such vessels is a price we must all pay, and I ask the Minister to respond positively this evening.

9.38 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing this important debate and, indeed, on having the foresight to do so on a night when the main business in the Chamber collapsed early, which will allow a few other Members to contribute. I hope other hon. Members will have something to say, because the hon. Gentleman has explained at some length the importance of this issue to our island and coastal communities.

It was not a great surprise when we heard after the autumn statement that the provision of the emergency towing vessel was no longer a priority for the MCA and the Treasury, but it was an exceptionally short-sighted decision. The extent to which the MCA has been culpable in relation to the management of this resource—this is the point I was going to make the hon. Gentleman towards the end of his speech—is demonstrated not just by the fact that we now have only one ETV in Orkney, but by the fact that the MCA has been much more reluctant to task it in recent times. The hon. Gentleman referred to the MV Nordholm, which was a work boat from a fish farming company that was owned and operated by constituents of mine. I have been in contact with them and in correspondence with Sir Alan Massey about the incident. In essence, the boat was left with the lifeboat holding it off the rocks, and it was quite some time before the MCA could be persuaded to task the tug. That is illustrative of its attitude towards emergency towing vessels.

On 10 February, the MCA, to its credit—I use the term in the loosest possible sense—held a stakeholders event in Edinburgh at which it outlined its risk assessment. It was one of the most concerning explanations that I have heard from any Government Department or agency in my 14 and a half years as a Member of Parliament. First, its risk assessment was not done in accordance with the industry standards—that is, it was not done by people independent of the agency or a panel of people but by one person, who is an employee of the MCA. When we heard about the risks that it had assessed, we found that it had drilled down, at some length and in some detail, into the question of collision. In fact, because of the volume of traffic, collision in the Minch, Pentland firth, the Fair Isle channel and elsewhere in the Western Isles or Northern Isles has never really been a problem, so the MCA assessed a risk of something that has never happened in the past while ignoring the actual risks that have been encountered in everyday situations, some of which the hon. Gentleman touched on.

The MCA looked in detail at the traffic in the Minch and Pentland firth, which not exclusively but principally includes ferry traffic. The ferries are good, modern, well maintained vessels, which, by and large, tend not to go to sea when the conditions are particularly difficult or challenging. The MCA did not even look at the tanker traffic going through Yell sound into Sullum Voe in Shetland, so the oil tankers going into Shetland that formed the basis of the need for the ETVs in the first place were not part of its risk assessment. It was a seriously deficient piece of work. For all its apparent deficiencies, it still concluded that removing Herakles, the ETV that is currently stationed there, would leave the north and north-western waters of Scotland exposed to unacceptable levels of risk. The MCA then went on to speak about the availability of alternatives. It was pretty well apparent from the discussion that followed on 10 February that it does not see where these alternatives are going to come from.

All this comes a mere seven weeks before the contract is going to end on 31 March. This is all work that, if the MCA was serious about discharging its responsibilities with regard to maritime safety, should have been done before it was prepared to offer up the removal of the ETV in the comprehensive spending review, but it was not done. Frankly, we are left with a mess. It is not the Minister’s fault—the fault clearly lies in Southampton with the MCA—but it is his responsibility. I do not see how it can possibly be fixed between now and 31 March. Apparently we will go back to Edinburgh on 4 March, so we will hear what the MCA has to say at that point. Frankly, however, given the parameters it outlined to us on 10 February, I do not think we will hear anything new.

If nothing else, will the Minister promise us a little more breathing space so that the work that should have been done thus far can be done? It would be criminally irresponsible for the Government to allow the contract to lapse on 31 March and for there to be no coverage thereafter. Concerns have been raised not just by different industries but by local authorities. If the Minister is prepared to offer us a bit more time, I hope he will agree to meet me, parliamentary colleagues and the local authorities of the Highland region, the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, which made that direct request of the MCA on 10 February. Perhaps he will tell us whether he is prepared to do that and, even better, to hold that meeting on the isles or in the north of Scotland.

Breathing space would give us the opportunity to look again at how the contract has operated in the past. It is an expensive contract—we know that—but it is worth paying for. Given the volume of work available to tugs with the required ballast pull capacity, there is an opportunity to get a good deal for the Government and the taxpayer. The chair of the tug operators association was present at the session on 10 February, and he openly said that it was possible to secure a price for a contract that could run for five, 10 or even 15 years. That would provide great value for money and give our island and coastal communities the knowledge that we had provision and that we would not just be living from one comprehensive spending review to the next.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber reminded us of the genesis of the tug provision, which came about as a result of the 1995 Donaldson report. The Braer ran aground off Quendale in Shetland in 1992, and I was still dealing with the long tail of resulting cases when I
[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

was first elected here nine years later in 2001. It is no exaggeration to say that the lives of hundreds, possibly thousands, of people in Shetland were changed forever the night the Braer ran aground. We talk about the impact on the industries and about the economic and environmental impact, and that is absolutely true, but the human impact of such an event is absolutely phenomenal, and I just do not know how we can put a price on that.

I have seen what happens if such things are not taken seriously and are allowed to happen again. That is what happened in Galicia in the north-west corner of Spain. When the Prestige ran aground there, it was the second major oil spill in that area in 10 years. I remember visiting the area as a newly elected MP in 2002 and being absolutely horrified by the post-traumatic effect on communities that had been blighted not just once but twice.

Given the location, geography, history and background of the communities under discussion, they are among the most precious and fragile in our country. That is why, as the hon. Gentleman said, it would be unacceptable to leave them exposed to further risk in the way currently proposed.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on securing this debate on the subject of ETVs. Only the Department for Transport could come up with a three-letter acronym for a three-letter word—tug. Let me be clear from the start that I share the hon. Gentleman’s passion for protecting the Scottish coast. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) said that I did not care about Scotland. I assure him that Scotland is every bit as much part of my country as is Yorkshire or any other part. I do care for the environment around Scotland and for the welfare of seamen on that part of our seas.

Mr MacNeil: I am grateful to the Minister for mentioning me and for giving way, as is the convention in the House. Will we see his concern and his fine words manifested not only in the retention of the ETV in the Northern Isles, but in the return of the ETV to Stornoway, in the Hebrides?

Mr Goodwill: Let me develop my argument, and I will return to that point. Scotland is not only a stunning landscape but the home of important industries such as agriculture and fishing, which are economically important to Scotland and the whole United Kingdom. Protecting the environment and safety at sea are our top priorities. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned the Cromarty firth oil transfer licence. Marine Scotland was directly consulted on 10 December, and on 8 February, when the consultation ended, it had not responded. When it was asked whether it intended to respond, the answer was no. I hope that that clarifies that point.

Shipping has a good safety record, but we must guard against complacency, because incidents happen. The last major environmental tragedy to befal the Scottish coast was the loss of the oil tanker Braer in the early ‘90s. We are very lucky that because of the seascapes, much of the oil was dispersed. As a member of the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety, I, like the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), visited the Galicia area and saw some of the devastation caused to the beaches, the marine environment and the marine ecosystem by the heavy oil. The oil clogged up the beaches, and it was heartbreaking to see the seabirds that were affected by it.

That was 23 years ago, and it is to the credit of the shipping industry and the skills of its seafarers that we have not had an incident on the same scale since. As we have heard, the late Lord Donaldson of Lymington conducted an extensive review of safety after the Braer incident. His report, “Safer Ships, Cleaner Seas”, was published in May 1994. It is easy to select quotes from Lord Donaldson’s excellent report. He recommended that the Government set up a system to ensure that tugs with adequate salvage capacity were available at key points around the UK’s coast. He also said that salvage was, and should remain, a primarily private sector service. That is, of course, what happens around the UK’s coast, with the exception of Scotland. The shipping industry pays directly for towage where it is required, at no cost to the public. Lord Donaldson was equally clear that the costs of pollution prevention should be met by potential polluters rather than by the Government and the public.

Mr MacNeil: The Minister’s arguments are all well and good if there are tug boats available to do that work, but what if there are no tug boats available? Where coastal communities and our coastline are at risk, a responsible Government would make sure that that capacity was there where the market and the private sector were failing. The market and the private sector are failing in that on the north and west coast of Scotland. My hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) has secured the debate because of that failure and the lack of those boats.

Mr Goodwill: If the hon. Gentleman. will relax a little, I will come on to some of those points. He might find that he need not be quite as irate as he is, because I share his concerns.

The world has moved on in the more than 20 years since Lord Donaldson wrote his report, and shipping safety has moved on, too. We have seen the introduction of the new global maritime distress and safety system, electronic charts, bridge watch systems, integrated bridge navigation systems, automatic identification systems, better standards of training for seafarers, improved and more reliable ship propulsion and engine systems, and the international safety management quality code. Those have all added to the tools available to support safer navigation practice.

Ian Blackford: I agree with the Minister’s points about the improvements that have taken place, but they would still not prevent things such as the Lyublinsk Seaways, which ran aground on Ardnamurchan, or indeed the Costa Concordia. That is the point. Even with the improvements that have been made, there is still a risk to our communities from something like that happening—an unexpected happening, such as an oil tanker running aground. This is about how we provide such protection, even with the improvements that have taken place in the shipping industry.
Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman’s point is absolutely valid. I am talking about some of the other vessels that we have been able to remove from around the coast because of other factors.

There is improved automatic monitoring of ship movements from the shore, both by Her Majesty’s Coastguard and by port authorities. That is why we felt it was right in 2011 to decide to withdraw the Government-funded tug operations in the Dover strait and in the south-west approaches off Falmouth. The savings were substantial. Withdrawing the ETVs elsewhere in the UK saved the public purse approximately £32.5 million over the last spending review period. The ETV based in Orkney in the Northern Isles is funded until 31 March, at a cost of roughly £2 million to £3 million per year.

The availability of commercial tug and salvage operations in such areas persuaded us that it was no longer appropriate for the UK taxpayer to fund that provision. That decision has been borne out by the fact that commercial tugs have provided assistance where that has been necessary. However, we recognised that the picture was different on the Scottish coast, where there is a lack of larger commercial tugs. One Government-funded tug has been retained since then, based at Kirkwall in the Orkneys, and can operate both to the north and to the west.

The positioning of the ETV was carefully considered and was based on the density of shipping across the Northern and Western Isles region, notably of tanker vessels; the availability of shelter during inclement weather; and the ready availability of effective logistics support. On balance, the density of shipping, particularly of tanker vessels, carried the greatest weight and predicated the stationing of the tug in and around the Orkney Islands. That provision costs the taxpayer between £2 million and £3 million annually, as I have mentioned.

Since its retention in 2011, the emergency towing vessel Herakles has been used to offer a tow just four times. The tug has been asked to stand by and ready itself for potential towage on other occasions purely as a precautionary measure. At no time has any ship needed to be towed; nor has there been any occurrence of pollution within the marine environment through a lack of a timely and effective towing service. It is therefore right that we consider whether it is appropriate for the UK taxpayer to continue to fund that provision. We have not included the provision in our current spending plans.

Mr MacNeil: In fairness to the Minister he is genuinely allowing us to have an exchange of views. However, I find his argument akin to saying, “My house was built in 1906 and it has not been on fire since, and therefore I do not need fire insurance for my house.” The reality is—that is the point made by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber in this debate—that we should have an insurance policy. The Minister is telling me that, no matter the age of my house, I do not need insurance for my house—or, in this case, coastal insurance. In that, the UK Government have been found short and very wanting.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is quite correct to raise the issue of risk. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland talked about the MCA looking at all potential risks. Indeed, the risk assessment by the MCA looked at all factors, including mechanical failure, collision risk, traffic volumes and the weather, including the very severe weather that can affect that part of the world. The stakeholder meeting on 10 February scrutinised the risk assessment, and all parties agreed with the assessment, including the fact that risk levels increase without ETV provision. The MCA will carry out further refinement of the risk assessment in the light of stakeholder discussions.

Ian Blackford: I am listening very carefully to the hon. Gentleman, who is being very considerate with his time. He is identifying that there is a risk from the removal of the ETV. We already know that a grounding has taken place at Ardmurchar. We already know that the MCA has referred to the time it took to travel to that vessel. The Orkney vessel cannot provide that degree of protection in a timely manner on the west coast. To give security to our community, we need to retain the insurance cover that many of us have mentioned.

We need the vessel in Orkney, but we desperately need the vessel on the west coast. What will the Minister say if we end up with an incident at some point in the future—heaven forbid—if we could have had such an ETV to give us at least a degree of protection. That is the price we are asking the Government to pay tonight.

Mr Goodwill: I have made the point that the one vessel we have is best stationed where it is because of the risk and the type of traffic to which it can respond.

We have not made a final decision on whether this provision should continue. I have asked the MCA to consult all interested parties on two questions. First, what is the shared view on the risk of pollution off the coast of Scotland and how has that changed since 2011?

10 pm
Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House:

Mr Goodwill: The second question is what alternative arrangements are available to maintain an appropriate towing capability that could reduce the burden on the UK taxpayer.

As we have heard, the MCA held its first consultative meeting in Edinburgh on 10 February. It was attended by the agency’s chief executive, Sir Alan Massey, which demonstrates the priority the Government give to this matter. I was delighted to hear that the engagement of stakeholders and interested parties was positive and constructive.

In refining the risk assessment, there are many factors to take into account, including the density of shipping, the variety of cargoes, the size of today’s ships, the scenarios in which ships may get into difficulty and, of course, the picture of available tugs and salvage solutions. The MCAs officials have gathered a great deal of additional information to add to their understanding of the current risk. It is clear, however, that the overall risk picture is similar to how it looked in 2011, when the decision was taken to retain one Government-funded tug.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I did not intend to speak in this debate, but I have heard the Government talk about risk on so many occasions
and it strikes me that they are being very badly briefed, because they do not seem to understand what risk means. At the very simplest, two components are being misunderstood. The first is the probability of an event occurring. To follow what my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) said, even if something might happen only once every 50 years, it could happen next week. It does not mean that we will have to wait 50 years for it to occur.

The second point, on which very little has been said, is that we must take account of the nature of the negative outcome. I would argue, as have many people, that because of the nature of shipping today and the types of cargo that are being moved, such as waste, the catastrophic nature of the negative outcome is greater than it would have been 20 or 30 years—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I know that the hon. Gentleman said that he was not going to make a speech, but if he kept his interventions a bit shorter, we would all be very grateful.

Mr Goodwill: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are acutely aware of the risk and the damage that could be caused to the environment or, indeed, the loss of life that could occur if that risk is not correctly assessed and the response correctly put in place.

The meeting on 10 February started to explore whether there might be alternative ways to provide a tug capability. Another meeting with stakeholders is scheduled for Edinburgh on 9 March. We may find that a longer-term solution rests not on one approach, but on a combination of options. I want to give the MCA time and space to work through all reasonable options with the stakeholders to find a longer-term solution. That considered thought and the development of expert advice simply cannot be achieved before the current funding ends on 31 March.

I can therefore announce to the House that I have instructed the MCA to make immediate arrangements to extend the provision of a Government-funded emergency towing vessel to mirror the current arrangement until 30 September this year. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland for making the case that was made about the availability of tugs because, sadly, of the demise of the North sea oil industry and other areas where we may be able to come up with something more cost-effective.

Ian Blackford: We welcome the announcement the Government have made this evening. That is the right thing to do. What I would say to the Minister, however, is that we explained what happened in Ardnamurchan. The ETV cannot get from Orkney in a reasonable time. In the light of the decision the Minister has made this evening and of the risk assessment that must take place, will he revisit the need and desire for a second vessel based in Stornoway to cover the west coast, based on a realistic understanding of risk as outlined by me, my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) and others? We cannot accept that our communities should be left at risk. This is a small price to pay. We need that insurance policy. I am grateful that the Orkney vessel is being kept on for the next six months, but please let us make sure we get a solution that protects all our communities. That means the re-establishment of a two-vessel solution for the north and the west of Scotland.

Mr Goodwill: I certainly hear what the hon. Gentleman says. The provision of the ETV and the steaming times to get to certain locations where it may be needed is something we need to address. I urge all those with an interest to seize the opportunity this extra time brings to work with the MCA to implement a longer term strategy to meet this need. I hope right hon. and hon. Members will give their encouragement for that.

As I have said in response to questions from hon. Members, the Government recognise the importance of ensuring shipping activities off the coast of Scotland remain safe.

Mr MacNeil: I am very grateful for the Government U-turn, although it is only for six months. We have concentrated a lot on pollution, but two months ago the cruise ship Star Pride ran aground at 6.15 am on 22 December near Isla de Coiba, Panama. In such a situation many lives are in peril. Luckily, the climate was better there. There is increased cruise traffic off the west coast of Scotland. Where are the tug boats or the security to ensure that such a situation would not turn into a human catastrophe? We talk about environmental catastrophes, but we have to be aware of human catastrophes. The Government are making a U-turn, but I hope that they carry on steaming further south and think of the Hebrides and the west coast too.

Mr Goodwill: I have already made it very clear that we have two considerations in terms of the marine environment and pollution, particularly from vessels carrying oil, but there is also the potential loss of life from vessels that cannot receive timely assistance.

I will make a final decision about whether it is right for the UK taxpayer to continue funding the emergency towing vessel provision in the light of the MCA’s advice before the end of September. We look forward to colleagues giving evidence and giving their views on that consideration.

I will, of course, be consulting Scottish Ministers on those options before a final decision is made. As I have said, I am happy to meet island councils to hear their ideas for the future. Indeed, I look forward to travelling north, if the diary allows and now there will be a bit...
more daylight up there, to visit some of the locations and hear at first hand from people on the ground.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.8 pm

*House adjourned.*
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—

Abolition of the Death Penalty

1. Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): What steps the Government are taking to support the global abolition of the death penalty. [903694]

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): We oppose the use of the death penalty in all circumstances and advocate global abolition. The Government support a number of programmes around the world to promote both abolition and a moratorium on executions in those countries where the death penalty is still on the statute book.

Callum McCaig: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he present a new strategy for the abolition of the death penalty, following on from the 2010 to 2015 strategy? Will that new strategy include Saudi Arabia?

Mr Lidington: We oppose the death penalty in every country in the world, including Saudi Arabia, where it is still part of the criminal law. The abolition of the death penalty remains integral to all the human rights work that my Department does.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the fact that the long-term trend is for reducing the number of executions and also the number of states carrying out executions. Will the Minister join me in expressing concern about areas of the world where that is not the case? Does he agree that if it is wrong to take a life, it is wrong for the state to take a life in revenge?

Mr Lidington: That is certainly my view, and the Government’s position is to oppose capital punishment. We need also to bear in mind the fact that while capital punishment exists, it is potentially a risk for a British citizen, anywhere in the world, who might be found guilty of a criminal offence.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Does the Minister share my horror that the United States remains in the top five countries for executing people, despite a reduction in the number of executions last year? When did he last speak to his American counterpart about the US record on executing people?

Mr Lidington: As I am sure the right hon. Lady knows, in the United States this is largely a matter for a state legislatures and state governments, rather than for the federal Government. We do take up cases with the relevant authorities, as appropriate, and when the lawyers and British citizens ask us to do so.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Belarus is the only country in Europe that still executes its citizens. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that in the past three months two of its citizens have been sentenced to death? If Belarus wants to become a full member of the Council of Europe, should it not abide by international norms and the European regulations?

Mr Lidington: I very much agree with what my hon. Friend says. In all our dealings with the Belarusian Government, we do make clear the need for them not only to move to international and European standards on capital punishment, but to take action to improve what remains a dismal human rights record in that country.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Further to the Minister’s answer to the question from the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), is he aware of the concerns of Reprieve that drugs manufactured by UK company Hikma Pharmaceuticals were exported last year to the state of Arkansas for use in lethal injections? Hikma has told me in correspondence that it does not export for this purpose but that “any sales to these entities usually occur through the use of distributors”. This seems such an obvious loophole, so why is nobody closing it?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to look into the case that the right hon. Gentleman describes and to write to him in due course.

Syria Peace Talks

2. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of recent progress on the Syria peace talks. [903695]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): On 11 February, the International Syria Support Group, meeting in Munich, reached agreement to deliver humanitarian assistance to besieged communities and to implement a cessation of hostilities. I am pleased to say that the first deliveries of aid have now been made, and yesterday there was an announcement of agreement between Russia and the United States on the detailed arrangements for the cessation of hostilities, which will come into force at midnight on Saturday. If that cessation is fully implemented—faithfully implemented—by all the parties, this could be an important step towards a lasting political settlement in Syria.

Helen Hayes: The bombing of two hospitals and other health facilities in northern Syria is completely unacceptable and a clear breach of international humanitarian law. Does the Minister agree that those
Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady identifies an incident that has caused widespread outrage across the world, but in her question she has put her finger on the problem: a referral to the International Criminal Court requires a resolution of the United Nations Security Council, one veto-holding member of which is the Russian Federation, so it is unlikely that we will succeed going down that route.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Turkish policy towards Syrian Kurdish forces seems inconsistent with our own; inconsistent with the prospect of supporting Syrian peace talks; and inconsistent with the opportunity to form a united front against Daesh. What is the Foreign Secretary’s assessment?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right that the Syrian Kurds are an important part of the equation and they have to be brought into any enduring solution in Syria, but Turkey has a problem with links between PKK—a terrorist group that is designated as such in both Turkey and the UK—and Syrian Kurdish groups. There are overlying conflicts here, and the Turkish-Kurdish conflict is a major complicating factor. What we have seen over the past weeks is very disturbing evidence of co-ordination between Syrian Kurdish forces, the Syrian regime and the Russian Air Force, which is making us distinctly uneasy about the Kurds’ role in all of this.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): With the Russian indiscriminate bombing of civilians in Syria driving the refugee crisis in a deliberate foreign policy tool to destabilise and weaken Europe, does the Secretary of State agree that now is not the time even to talk about weakening EU sanctions against the Putin regime?

Mr Hammond: I very strongly agree with the right hon. Gentleman that now is not the time to send Russia any signals of compromise or of pulling back. The only language that Mr Putin understands is the language of strength and, I am afraid, the language of confrontation. When unacceptable behaviour on the scale that we have seen in Syria occurs, we have to stand up to be counted, however inconvenient that may be for some who have to be counted.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Whether we like it or not, Russia is an essential prerequisite to any successful talks. The American Secretary of State has a close working relationship with the Russian Foreign Minister, talking to him nearly every week. When did the Foreign Secretary last talk to the Russian Foreign Minister and what is he doing to improve his personal relationship with him?

Mr Hammond: Our relationships with our Russian counterparts are difficult. I last spoke to Sergei Lavrov on 11 February during the Munich International Syria Support Group meeting where he and I had some prolonged and robust exchanges around the table. I do speak very regularly with the US Secretary of State, most recently meeting him on Saturday morning, so I am very much aware of the discussions that he is having with our mutual Russian counterpart. The problem is that Russian policy on Syria is made not in the Russian Foreign Ministry, but inside a tiny cabal around President Putin at the heart of the Kremlin.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What dialogue has the Minister had with our French counterparts as a result of the Syrian crisis regarding the safety and child protection arrangements for unaccompanied child refugees who are at grave risk and who are due to be dispersed from the jungle camp in Calais?

Mr Hammond: I have had discussions about the situation in Syria with my former French counterpart who retired the week before last and with my new French counterpart, Jean-Marc Ayrault, on a regular basis. The issues relating to would-be migrants accumulated around Calais are for the Home Secretary, and she has very regular discussions with her counterpart, Bernard Cazeneuve.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is absolutely right that the Russians are a key part to establishing a meaningful political settlement in Syria. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that does not mean that we give in to the Russians across the rest of Europe and that the NATO commitment in the Baltic states is just as important to counterbalance whatever partnerships we use the Russians for in Syria?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. We are dealing with a raised level of Russian assertiveness—indeed, aggression—in many areas: in the Baltic, in Ukraine, and now in the middle east, and we have to be robust in all areas. He is also right—and our hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) was right—that Russia holds the key to the situation in Syria. I have said in the House before, and I shall say again today, that there is one person in the world who has the power to bring the misery in Syria to an end by picking up the phone and making one phone call, and that person is Vladimir Putin.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The whole House will welcome the ceasefire agreement, which is badly needed, but there have been promises from Russia before. The Russians have repeatedly claimed to attack terrorist groups when, in fact, they have attacked moderate opposition forces and civilians, so can the Foreign Secretary set out how breaches of the ceasefire agreement will be assessed?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady has put her finger on the problem. The ceasefire agreement will allow continued operations against Daesh, al-Nusra and associated terrorist groups designated by the UN Security Council, and no one would disagree with that. The problem is that the Russians claim that all their action to date has been against those groups. On the face of it, the Russians could be entering into this arrangement on the basis that they will not change their behaviour at all. Clearly, the cessation of hostilities will fail before it has even got off the ground if that is their intention, so everything hinges on Russian good intentions.
Diana Johnson: So can the Foreign Secretary explain what consideration has been given to a UN resolution to strengthen the ceasefire agreement and support the peace talks?

Mr Hammond: First, an arrangement has been agreed between the Russians and Americans for investigating alleged breaches of the ceasefire, and there is a commitment on both sides to working up a co-ordination cell to try to identify legitimate targets that can be struck during the ceasefire. As for the UN dimension, we are looking at that, and we would very much welcome a UN resolution behind the ceasefire. We already have UN resolution 2254, which we agreed on 18 December in New York, but we welcome further UN resolutions. That can only happen if the Russians are prepared to work with us, because they have a veto.

Kurdistan: ISIL/Daesh

3. Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): What diplomatic support the Government are providing in Kurdistan to tackle ISIL/Daesh.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Daesh is progressively being defeated in Iraq as the competence of Iraqi security forces improves. Specifically on Kurdistan, we are providing the Peshmerga with air power, logistical support, weapons and training.

Nusrat Ghani: Reports suggest that 45% of Kurdish forces are composed of women. Nesrin Abdalla, a unit commander in the Syrian Kurds women’s protection units, recently said: “We do this not just to protect ourselves, but also to change the way of thinking in the army, not only to gain power, but to change society, to develop it.”

What particular steps have the Government taken to ensure women’s participation in regional diplomatic talks, post-Daesh?

Mr Ellwood: May I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for that quote and for the work that she has done in pioneering the role that women can play? That is something that Staffan de Mistura, the UN envoy, recognises, and he is trying to include women’s voices in the peace talks that are taking place at the UN. On our front, British training is taking place in northern Iraq, and UK training teams will train female units in the Peshmerga.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), who chairs the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, what is the Minister’s current assessment of relations between the Turkish Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government?

Mr Ellwood: It is an important relationship that the two are developing, not least because there are economic benefits for both from the sale and movement of oil. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has outlined, there are concerns in Turkey because of the role, involvement and influence of the PKK, and we will monitor that carefully.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): Since the breakdown of the peace process last summer, there have been reports of an escalation in violence and of breaches of human rights in south-eastern Turkey in Kurdish areas such as Diyarbakir and Cizre, with the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians, curfews, the imprisonment of democratically elected politicians who would be key interlocutors in any future peace process, the imprisonment of academics, and lack of access for journalists to key areas. Will the Minister assure me that that will form part of the peace talks on Syria?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s question. I was able to raise the matter during my visit to the north of Iraq at the end of last year. We are concerned about the reports of alleged human rights abuses and we need to make sure that those are not overlooked.

Kashmir

4. Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): If he will take steps to support self-determination for the people of Kashmir.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire) rose—

Mr Speaker: Aah!

Mr Swire: The pleasure is entirely mutual, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I much appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s courtesy in notifying me of his travel plans. I know that he has only relatively recently got off a plane, so we are delighted to have him here, especially in view of the fact, of which he has previously informed the House, that he is responsible for three quarters of the world.

Mr Swire: Mr Speaker, you have just stolen my first line again.

On this important subject, it is, I repeat, for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation in Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or to act as a mediator.

Julie Cooper: Undoubtedly, this House has a great deal of respect for UN resolutions, and I am sure the Minister is aware that in 1948 the UN Security Council passed resolution 47 instructing the Governments of India and Pakistan to prepare for a plebiscite to determine the future of Kashmir. Almost 70 years have passed, thousands of Kashmiri men, women and children have been slaughtered, atrocities are committed daily, yet there is still no sign of any action to allow these people to vote on this most important issue. Does the Minister agree that the people of Kashmir should have the right to self-determination, and will he give an assurance—

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. I hope she is near the end of the sentence.

Julie Cooper: Will the Minister assure us that the British Government will do everything in their power to make that happen?
Mr Swire: We do not intend to support an international conference or plebiscite on Kashmir. Our long-standing position is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution. We are acutely aware of the allegations of human rights abuses in Kashmir. This was discussed with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when Prime Minister Modi was here in November 2015, and we continue to monitor the situation closely.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Many of my constituents who are of Kashmiri origin and heritage take the view that this entire problem was left behind by the UK when we ruled that area. Does the Minister not feel that there is an obligation on the UK to take a more proactive role and to do something positive to bring about a resolution to this long-running problem?

Mr Swire: My hon. Friend will be aware that we are talking about two sovereign countries, India and Pakistan. It is not for the United Kingdom to come between them, other than to urge them to talk. There are some good moves and communications between the leaders of Pakistan and India and they are discussing the subject, among other things, which we very much welcome.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): But I would say to the Minister that the situation has been going on for decades, and the UK has some expertise in building more peaceful settlements. Is there not a bit more that the UK could do to promote confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan, and at the very least raise this as a priority with the EU special representative so that some of our other allies know that this is more of a priority?

Mr Swire: We do things as best we can without getting directly involved, and we welcome the fact that on 25 December Prime Minister Modi visited Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan, the first such visit for 11 years. That must be good news, but the hon. Gentleman knows full well the long-standing position of the Government—and when he was in government the position was no different—that this is a matter for the Indians and the Pakistanis to resolve, not the United Kingdom.

Commonwealth: Trade and Diplomatic Connections

Mr Swire: I am pleased to hear the figures from my right hon. Friend’s constituency, and they can be echoed around the country as a result of the Government’s economic policies. We are an open, free-trading state, and we trade around the world. Trade within the Commonwealth is extremely important, and we need to do more to promote it. Trading between two Commonwealth countries is, on the whole, 19% or 20% cheaper than trading outside the Commonwealth. That is something we need to do, and we need to involve Commonwealth Trade Ministers more formally in working out how we can increase intra-Commonwealth trade.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Last year, Prime Minister Modi and our Prime Minister designated next year as the year of culture between India and the United Kingdom. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the British curry festival, which is taking place in New Delhi in March? British chefs from Leicester, London and Reading will be going to Delhi to make curry. Does he not agree that that is a real example of good relations between Commonwealth countries?

Mr Swire: At the risk of currying favour with the right hon. Gentleman, let me say that we must all wish our curry chefs every success when they travel to India. We must hope that they make a speedy return, because we would all miss our curry were they not home in our country.

Mr Swire: Characteristically—or maybe uncharacteristically—the Minister has more or less answered the question I was going to ask. Leaving aside trade between the UK and Commonwealth countries, the functioning of the Commonwealth will surely be enhanced if there is more trade between all Commonwealth countries. To what extent can the UK play a role in enhancing that intra-Commonwealth trade, particularly in areas where we have substantial Department for International Development, as well as Foreign Office, representation?

Mr Swire: It is as well to remember that we are an equal partner in the Commonwealth; we do not run the Commonwealth, and we wish Baroness Scotland every success in so doing. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] She clearly has the universal support of the House, which is manifestly a good thing. We want her to refocus the Commonwealth, and we want to spend much more time—similar issues are being discussed elsewhere in the world—discussing boosting trade, getting rid of tariffs and promoting intra-Commonwealth trade. That we can do. My noble Friend Lord Marland is doing a great job at the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council, and he had a great collection of 2,000 businesses at Valletta. We are hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting here in 2018, and business will play a large role in that Commonwealth conference.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I ask a more serious question about the Commonwealth and diplomatic relations? How many members of the
Commonwealth do not have an extradition agreement with this country? Increasingly, people who commit ghastly crimes flee to Pakistan, and we cannot bring them back to face justice. What is he doing about that?

**Mr Swire:** That is a very wide-ranging accusation. If the hon. Gentleman will write to me, or come to see me, about a specific case, I will be happy to look at it. We deal with things case by case.

**EU Referendum**

6. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What progress have the Government made on preparations for the EU referendum.

14. **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What progress have the Government made on preparations for the EU referendum.

**The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington):** The conduct regulations that set out the detailed framework of how the referendum poll will be administered have now been agreed by both Houses of Parliament. The date of the referendum must now be agreed by Parliament in a further statutory instrument, which was laid before both Houses in draft yesterday.

**Chris Stephens:** A record number of people registered to vote in the Scottish independence referendum—97% of the adult population. What efforts are the UK Government making to match that success?

**Mr Lidington:** This is, as the hon. Gentleman will know, the responsibility of the Electoral Commission, which is planning a campaign to raise awareness of the need to register in good time for the referendum.

**Kirsty Blackman:** Will the Minister give comfort to the Scottish students who are studying through Erasmus across Europe by providing details of what contingency plans are in place should there be a no vote in the EU referendum?

**Mr Lidington:** My advice to Scottish students studying in universities elsewhere in the EU would be to ensure that they are registered to vote so that their votes in the referendum count along with everybody else’s. The hon. Lady puts her finger on one of the uncertainties about a potential British exit from the European Union, because, after all, it is European law and the treaties that give British citizens the right to live, study and work in other EU countries.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Minister may recall that in response to my amendment to the Finance Bill last year, the Government promised to negotiate with the European Commission for a zero rate of VAT on women’s sanitary products, and the Chancellor repeated that pledge in his autumn statement. It is time the tampon tax was ended, so did the Prime Minister use his recent negotiations to raise this issue and, if so, what progress has been made?

**Mr Lidington:** As I think the hon. Lady knows, value added tax was already part of the EU system before the United Kingdom joined the European Community in the 1970s. A review of the current EU directives on value added tax is due to take place this year, and that is the appropriate forum in which to raise this issue, where the Government very much hope to secure the reforms about which she speaks.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Successive UK Governments have signed up to a range of EU agreements vital in protecting our environment, upholding workers’ rights, and ensuring an EU-wide energy market. The removal of such environmental controls and statutory maternity pay, for example, would be a backward step. I am sure, therefore, that the Minister will agree that our membership of the EU is vital in promoting the interests of the people of Scotland and across the UK. However, he will be aware that the Justice Secretary said last week that “our membership of the European Union prevents us being able to change huge swathes of law and stops us being able to choose who makes critical decisions which affect all our lives.” Can the Minister therefore confirm specifically—

[Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Finish the sentence, very quickly.

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** Can the Minister therefore confirm specifically how his Government’s plans have been constrained by European legislation or regulation?

**Mr Lidington:** As with every member state of the EU, particular issues will come up—particular legislative measures—where we find some of the rulings irksome. On balance, however, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out very clearly yesterday, the Government are convinced that membership of a reformed European Union will make the British people more prosperous, more secure, and more influential in the world than any of the alternatives so far proposed.

**Ms Ahmed-Sheikh:** It is therefore important that voters have the full facts at their disposal when making a choice in June. Have the Government calculated the cost of implementing the proposals agreed at the EU Council last week, particularly those relating to the administration of the new benefits rules? What will the net saving to the Treasury be?

**Mr Lidington:** Some of this will be a matter for the implementing regulations that will now follow, both at European level and at national level. The answer to the hon. Lady’s question will depend in large part on the level of benefits and tax credits in the United Kingdom at the appropriate time. These matters will therefore become clear as time goes on.

**Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): I wish the Minister great success in trying to alter the level of VAT on sanitary towels. If the British people decide in the referendum to leave the European Union, would it then be up to the British Government to decide the level of VAT on sanitary towels and other products?

**Mr Lidington:** That would depend on the nature of the subsequent relationship. The reason that value added tax has, since before our membership of the EU, been dealt with, to an extent, at EU level is that the price at which goods are sold has a direct impact on the notion
of a single market and free trade within Europe. The issues that my hon. Friend raises would have to be tackled in the course of negotiations about such a future relationship.

Oil

7. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the effects of high oil supply and low oil and gas prices on (a) Russia and (b) countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. [903701]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Brent oil prices are hovering around $30 a barrel—the lowest in 13 years—as a consequence of lower global demand, continued high OPEC production and the resilient production in the USA. GCC countries are taking action. They are, in fact, diversifying their economies and removing subsidies. Historically, about half of the Russian Government’s revenues have come from oil and gas, and Russia’s GDP declined by just under 4% last year.

Martin Vickers: Falling oil prices are clearly having a dramatic effect on the economies of many oil-producing countries. I was part of a delegation that visited Saudi Arabia last week, where we heard about what its Government are doing to diversify. What encouragement are our Government giving to other countries to help and support them to diversify, and what opportunities are available to British companies to provide assistance?

Mr Ellwood: As my hon. Friend outlines, there are enormous opportunities not just in Saudi Arabia but across the Gulf. We are working on diversification with countries that produce and export hydrocarbons, and helping them with renewables and green energy. Saudi Arabia has also expressed an interest in opening up tourism. Those are important aspects in which Britain can play an important role.

Daesh

8. Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): What discussions he has had with other members of the international coalition on improving diplomatic co-ordination against Daesh. [903702]

9. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What discussions he has had with other members of the international coalition on improving diplomatic co-ordination against Daesh. [903703]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): Britain was a driving force behind the creation of the global coalition. We hosted the first coalition meeting in London in January 2015. I frequently discuss the campaign against Daesh with coalition and other international partners, including at a coalition small group meeting in Rome earlier this month.

Nadhim Zahawi: The Kurdistan Regional Government army has been valiantly battling against Daesh over a 1,000 km frontline since summer 2014. Will my right hon. Friend pay tribute to the peshmerga and say more about the role they may play in the liberation of Mosul?

Mr Hammond: I am very happy to pay tribute to the Peshmerga. They have proved themselves to be an extraordinarily resilient fighting force and perhaps the most effective force operating against Daesh. The UK is training and providing equipment to the Peshmerga. I had an opportunity a couple of weeks ago to meet President Barzani of the KRG, to talk about the liberation of Mosul and the role that the Peshmerga might play. I am pleased to be able to report two things. First, the KRG appear to have become more open to the idea that the Peshmerga will play a role in the liberation of Mosul. That will be very important. They have also agreed to Iraqi Government security forces being based in the KRG to prepare for the assault on Mosul. Those two things make it much more likely that we will see a successful assault on Mosul earlier rather than later.

Michael Tomlinson: Seeking a diplomatic solution in Syria has gone hand in hand with our humanitarian aid in the region. Will the Secretary of State set out how increased diplomatic co-operation will improve and assist our humanitarian aid in the region, specifically in neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon?

Mr Hammond: As the whole House will know, we hosted in London on 4 February a very successful conference on Syria and the region, raising $11 billion in a single day. The real significance of that meeting, however, was that we moved on from the idea of simply collecting money and distributing it to working with the host countries in the region to ensure that refugees are able to access the labour market, get education for their children and access healthcare, making them less likely to feel the need to decamp and become irregular migrants heading towards Europe.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Daesh moves into areas of conflict and ungoverned spaces. King Abdullah of Jordan has asked that we reach out to areas such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo, as he regards them to be among the next potential trouble spots. Are we making any progress?

Mr Hammond: Yes. The right hon. Lady is right. We should be very much focused not only on the countries that already face that challenge, but on the countries that are next in line for the challenge, and we should seek to reinforce them. I am happy to tell her, if she was not aware of this, that the Prime Ministers of all the western Balkan countries were in London yesterday, and I had the opportunity to meet the Prime Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Albania, and Montenegro. We are working closely with them to ensure the resilience and the European trajectory of that region.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): On the issue of Daesh fighters returning home to countries here in Europe, what diplomatic co-ordination efforts have been made to develop a common response among countries in Europe to ensure that we keep our citizens safe and prevent those people from coming back to wreak havoc, through terrorism, on towns and cities in the UK?

Mr Hammond: Different countries in Europe have different domestic legislation around that issue. We in the UK have some of the most robust measures available...
to us to deal with returning fighters. It is precisely because of the importance of the exchange of information between European partners that the Prime Minister was able to confirm yesterday that we believe that Britain is safer and more resilient against the threat of terrorism because of its co-operation within the European Union.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): As operations against Daesh in Iraq are successful—[Interuption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must be heard. There is some chuntering from a sedentary position, by which he should not remotely be deflected. Stick to your course, man.

Royston Smith: You are very kind, Mr Speaker. As operations against Daesh in Iraq are successful, what is the threat of Daesh’s moving to Libya? Has the Foreign Secretary made an assessment of that eventuality?

Mr Hammond: There is clearly a risk that as Daesh is militarily defeated in Iraq and then in Syria, the embryonic Daesh presence in Libya, particularly around Sirte, could become a new base for operations just 100 miles off the coast of Europe. That is why we are working with our partners and allies to encourage the formation of a Libyan Government of national accord that we can work with to start stabilising the country and pushing back on the Daesh footholds in Libya.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Further to the last question, can the Foreign Secretary say how far ahead we are in bringing about that co-ordination and establishing a stable authority in Libya to take on Daesh? We have seen recently an increase in Daesh activity, and there is still a lot of disconnect between the different bodies in Libya. Will he give us a bit more information about what progress is being made?

Mr Hammond: There is progress being made among European partners and with the US on preparing the kind of support we could give to a Government of national accord in Libya when and if one is formed. The problem is that several months after we first expected that to happen, the Government have still not been formed. We are working very closely with the parties in Libya and with the regional powers who have influence, particularly Egypt, to encourage Prime Minister Siraj to take the necessary steps to get that Government formed and approved so that we can engage. There is a strong commitment by the European partners to engage once that Government have been created.

Israeli Election

10. Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of the outcome of the March 2015 election in Israel on the peace process in that region.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Much gets said, as we know, during election cycles, and we were concerned by some of the statements that were made during the Israeli election. I was in Israel last week, and I can confirm that I had meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu. He has made it very clear that he remains committed to the two-state solution.

Clive Lewis: It is more than 20 years since Oslo. There are now more than 350,000 illegal Israeli settlers in the occupied west bank and 300,000 illegal Israeli settlers in occupied East Jerusalem, and the Netanyahu Government continue to announce the building of more illegal settlements. Does the Minister believe that that will aid the peace process? If not, what is he doing about it?

Mr Ellwood: The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and I have made it very clear on the record that that is unhelpful and takes us in the wrong direction. During my visit last week, I visited some of the settlements that are developing. Although announcements of new settlements have slowed, the existing settlements are starting to grow, and that happens without people seeing it. There is an area to the north of Jerusalem called the Ariel finger, which, if it continues to grow as it is doing, will eventually link up towards the north of Jericho. That will essentially mean that there will be no two-state solution. We need Israel to show that it is committed to the process and stop the settlements.

13. Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): On the issue of words, something that is regularly rubbish is the issue of incitement. We are seeing increasing incitement from the Palestinian Authority and on media such as Palestinian TV, some of which has been referenced by those committing knife attacks on civilians. Last week I visited a Jewish school in Brussels, where I heard some appalling stories of anti-Semitism being perpetrated in Europe, with people deliberately conflating Jews and Israel. Will the Minister condemn not only the incitement coming out of the Palestinian Authority, but the sort of attacks we are seeing in Europe as a result?

Mr Ellwood: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it is unacceptable for Israelis going about their business to be subject to some of the brutality and the murder we are seeing. Israel has the right—in fact, I would go further and say it has the obligation—to defend its citizens. We are seeing the anti-Semitism there, or such reactions, then reappearing, often through websites such as Facebook and so forth, in Europe or closer to home. We have been working hard with our international colleagues—the Prime Minister is very committed to this—to make sure that we stamp out anti-Semitism no matter where it is.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): A clear majority of Israelis consistently support setting up a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Does the Minister agree that actions such as Hamas’s rebuilding the terror tunnels to mount attacks on Israeli civilians from Gaza make that less and less obtainable?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. With some of the developments, it seems like déjà vu in the sense that we are going round this buoy again—rebuilding the tunnels, the aggravations, and then the missiles start to fly. Where does that actually take us? It is not a confidence-building measure, in the same way that building settlements is not a confidence-building measure. We need
to make sure that we empower the Palestinian Authority to look after and take responsibility for the governance of Gaza. That is the way forward.

**Sir Eric Pickles** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Surely there is a big contrast in the growth of extremism. The Israeli authorities deal with Jewish extremism—they investigate, they prosecute and they condemn—whereas the Palestinian Authority names schools after violent extremists, names sporting events after them and glorifies them on television. Will my hon. Friend take this opportunity to condemn absolutely the attitude of the Palestinian Authority and urge it to cease this senseless encouragement of violence?

**Mr Ellwood:** My right hon. Friend makes a very powerful argument. It is important to see that affirmative actions can be taken on both sides to reduce tensions, but I would raise the specific matter of using words to inflame the situation. For example, the recent remarks by the Health Minister in the Palestinian Authority condoning the attacks that are taking place were unhelpful. That takes us in the wrong direction, so we should do things to encourage those involved to refrain from doing so, and take steps to encourage them to act as a consequence.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I wish we had more time, but I am afraid we do not. I call Nic Dakin.

**Overseas Territories: Registers of Beneficial Ownership**

11. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): By what date he expects to have set a timetable for overseas territories with financial centres to adopt central registers of beneficial ownership or similarly effective systems.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge):** I had productive discussions at the Joint Ministerial Council with leaders of the overseas territories in December. We agreed progress on implementing central registers, and equally effective systems should be kept under continuous and close review. Discussions are still ongoing, but I want to see significant progress ahead of the anti-corruption summit that will be hosted by the Prime Minister in May.

**Nic Dakin:** Will the Minister confirm that the overseas territories and Crown dependencies will attend the summit? Will we do our part to make sure that we secure their commitment to clean up their act and make company owners public?

**James Duddridge:** Final invitations for the summit have not yet gone out, but discussions are very much ongoing. In fact, the director for overseas territories and the National Crime Agency are currently visiting the Cayman Islands and British Virgin Islands to thrash out some of the detail that is needed.

**Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Minister expect the registers to be publicly available, or will they be closed registers that can be accessed only by the relevant authorities?

**James Duddridge:** There will be open registers available for law enforcement agencies to interrogate. There will not be publicly open registers. That is a long-term aspiration, but initially we want there to be access for law enforcement agencies. That will create greater transparency and reduce corruption and terrorist payments.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In April 2014, the Prime Minister said:

“I believe that beneficial ownership and public access to a central register is key to improving the transparency of company ownership and vital to meeting the urgent challenges of illicit finance and tax evasion.”

Nearly two years have passed and there still appears to be no timetable for transparency arrangements in respect of the financial centres. Why is that?

**James Duddridge:** There has been much progress, which the hon. Lady dismisses too readily. There are checkpoints. Only last week, I spoke to overseas territory leaders. There are people out there at the moment and we hope to crystallise some of the improvements before the May summit on corruption. That summit was called by the Prime Minister and will be held here in London, which demonstrates the British Government’s commitment to this important issue.

**Catherine West:** Will the Minister tell the House the exact date by which he expects overseas territory financial centres to ensure that there are proper transparency arrangements, or will he continue to hear more excuses for inaction in the years to come?

**James Duddridge:** This is a matter of direction, rather than an ultimate destination. We will constantly ask the international community to do more to create greater transparency, but it is crucial that the international community, whether it is the Crown dependencies, the overseas territories or other overseas Governments, move together on this, because we want to eliminate the problem of corrupt and untransparent moneys, rather than shift it from territory to territory.

**Topical Questions**

**Mr Speaker:** I remind colleagues that in topical questions, there are supposed to be quick-fire questions and quick-fire answers.

**T1. 903634** Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond):** The Foreign Office’s mission is to protect Britain’s security, promote Britain’s prosperity and project our values through our diplomacy. The Prime Minister’s deal with the European Union offers the basis for Britain’s future prosperity and security in Europe. The crisis in Syria, the resulting irregular migration to Europe, the increased levels of Russian aggression and the continuing terrorist threat from Islamist extremism remain the principal threats to the security of the UK and UK citizens around the world.

**Mr Jayawardena:** I should refer Members to the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and to my position as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Sri Lanka. As we know from Northern Ireland,
reconciliation is possible only if both sides want to move forward. Will my right hon. Friend welcome the progress that has been made by the Sri Lankan Government in uniting the whole island by growing the economy and building a strong democracy? Indeed, will he encourage them to continue doing so?

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): Yes, I most certainly will. I was in Sri Lanka last month, where I met the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister and travelled to Jaffna in the north. I have subsequently spoken to Prince Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, the high commissioner in Geneva, who was in Sri Lanka from 6 to 9 February. We look forward to his update on Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council in June.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): As events in Ukraine and the middle east have reminded us, nations that are committed to peace, security and democracy need to stand together in the face of aggression. Our membership of the European Union is one of the most important ways in which we do that. The Foreign Secretary knows that ending our alliance with the EU would send a dangerous signal, including to President Putin and Daesh. Why does he think some of his Cabinet colleagues cannot see that and are intent on a course of action that would weaken Britain’s voice and influence in the world and undermine our security?

Mr Philip Hammond: Each person in this country will have to make up their own mind about the question before them in the forthcoming referendum. I have always said that this is a balancing equation—there are plusses and minuses in any international relationship. However, I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that on the question of Britain’s security and influence in the world, there is no doubt that we are stronger, safer and more influential by being part of the European Union than being out of it.

Hilary Benn: I am very grateful to the Foreign Secretary for that reply. The report of the UN Human Rights Council’s commission of inquiry on Syria, which was published earlier this month, found that:

“Flagrant violations of human rights and international humanitarian law continue unabated”.

The ceasefire that is due to come into effect this Saturday is desperately needed, but it will relieve suffering only if it is adhered to, as the Foreign Secretary said. What is his assessment of the prospects of ensuring that Russia respects the ceasefire by ending its attacks on the Syrian people? If it does not, what further pressure can be put on President Putin to do so?

Mr Hammond: As I have said, the Russians will say that they are complying with the ceasefire, and that continued attacks and airstrikes are justified by the terms of that ceasefire. It will be necessary to pore over individual attacks between the US and Russia in the co-ordination cell to identify exactly what happened. Whatever the technicalities, the big picture is this: unless the level of Russian airstrikes dramatically decreases, the ceasefire will not hold because the moderate armed opposition cannot and will not lay down their weapons while they are being annihilated from the air by Russian aircraft.

T2. [903635] Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister for Africa will be aware that the Tanzanian electoral commission annulled the general election results in Zanzibar at the back end of last year, and there has been increasing electoral violence in Zanzibar as we head towards the poll on 20 March. What representations will we make to the Tanzanian Government to ensure that the poll passes off peacefully, and that we do not return to the violence of 2000 and 2001?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): We are deeply concerned by the decision of the Zanzibar electoral commission to annul the elections for the Zanzibar presidency, and indeed the House of Representatives on 28 October. Our position was set out in a statement by the British high commissioner on 29 October, and we have raised those concerns at the highest level, including when the Foreign Secretary made a telephone call to then President Kikwete in October and my telephone call to the new Foreign Minister Mahiga in December, and the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruisslip Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), met the same individual in January. I hope to visit Tanzania in the coming months and reinforce those points in person.

GIVEN THE MINISTER’S RESPONSE TO EARLIER QUESTIONS RELATING TO THE BENEFIT TO THE UK OF REMAINING IN THE EU, IS IT NOT A REAL CONCERN THAT MANY OF HIS GOVERNMENT COLLEAGUES WOULD PUT OUR SECURITY AND ECONOMIC FUTURE AT RISK BY A BREXIT?

T3. [903636] Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Given the Minister’s response to earlier questions relating to the benefit to the UK of remaining in the EU, is it not a real concern that many of his Government colleagues would put our security and economic future at risk by a Brexit?

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): In this referendum, Members of Parliament will each have one vote, along with every member of the United Kingdom electorate. In my experience, there are deeply held views both for and against British membership of the EU in my party and that of the hon. Lady. My view is clear: this country will be more prosperous, secure and influential in the world through continued EU membership.

T4. [903637] Dr Andrew Morrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Given the ongoing Russian incursion into Georgian sovereign territory, does my right hon. Friend absolutely condemn the situation in the southern Caucasus? Does he think that the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia must now be regarded as the new normal?

Mr Philip Hammond: We should be alert to Russia’s aggressive actions in former Soviet Union countries wherever they are, not just in Ukraine. Arguably, we were too slow to recognise that what was happening in Georgia was the beginning of a new dimension to Russian foreign policy, and we should resist it robustly wherever it arises, and push back against it wherever we can.

T6. [903639] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the Secretary of States confirm whether his discussions with the United States about Libya have included the possibility of UK military action, and that there will be no UK military action in Libya without approval from this House?
**Mr Hammond:** As the hon. Gentleman knows well, we have a long-established convention that before committing UK forces to combat, in all situations where it is possible, that is, other than in a direct emergency, as they or where considerations of secrecy make it impossible—the Prime Minister is committed to bringing the issue before the House and allowing it an opportunity for debate.

**T5. [903638] Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con):** What assessment has the Department made of the security situation in Burundi, and what steps have been taken to bolster the presence of Her Majesty’s Government in Bujumbura?

**James Duddridge:** In response to the crisis, the UK has stepped up humanitarian support to refugees fleeing Burundi, providing £14 million to Tanzania and £4 million to Burundi. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), and I have also decided to recruit a full-time Burundian co-ordinator, based in Bujumbura. That will be good news as I know that hon. Members— including my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy)—have been pressing Her Majesty’s Government to do that, and it will be welcome news on both sides of the House.

**Mr Philip Hammond:** I think what the hon. Gentleman will find if he checks the record is that I had just come back from China where I had conveyed the message to the Chinese that their claim to be treated as a market economy should be judged through the prism of steel. Given that 70% of the Chinese steel industry is owned by the Chinese Government, will the Secretary of State now confirm that China should emphatically not be granted market economy status?

**Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** Our immigration controls in Calais are governed by the treaty of Le Touquet, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Europe well knows. He will also know, and the House of Commons Library has said, that the treaty can be broken only if the British or the French choose to do so, and it has absolutely nothing to do with whether we are members of the European Union. Will he ask whichever person who said it to stop talking this nonsense that if we leave the EU we are suddenly going to find a massive great refugee camp in the heart of Kent?

**Mr Liddington:** The Le Touquet treaty is certainly vital to this country’s border security. Of the 100,000 people who have been prevented from entering the UK in the past five years, roughly a quarter were stopped at Calais at the juxtaposed controls. We co-operate very closely with the French Government, but I fear my hon. Friend underestimates the extent of domestic French opposition to and protest against the juxtaposed controls. If we left the EU, the stock of good will towards Le Touquet and this country would be severely depleted.

**T9. [903642] Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con):** Following the recent action against Daesh in Libya, will my hon. Friend update the House on the situation there, as well as his plans to create a permanent memorial to the victims of Sousse, whose murders were planned from Libya?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood):** As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has outlined, there is a migration and a concern that Daesh is moving out, under pressure in Iraq and Syria, to other parts of the world, including Libya. My hon. Friend is right to make the connection between what happened in Libya, the training and the terrorist attack that took place in Sousse killing so many Britons. I am pleased to say that we will hold a memorial service on 12 April to mark this event.

**T8. [903641] Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab):** A recent UN report suggested that, in a disturbing violation of human rights, Saudi Arabia’s military operation in Yemen is targeting civilians. Is the Minister confident that the UK Government are fulfilling their obligations under the arms trade treaty in relation to Saudi Arabia?

**Mr Ellwood:** We have discussed, and are looking in detail at, the UN panel of experts report. It was done by satellite evidence—we have to bear it in mind that the experts did not actually visit the country itself. We have shared and discussed information with Saudi Arabia. I had a letter from the ambassador this week confirming that every effort is being made to follow human rights law in support of President Hadi and UN resolution 2216.

**Mr Philip Hammond:** Yes, we are clear with local authorities that they are bound by and must follow procurement rules, but we are clear that we do not support boycott movements. The Minister for the Cabinet Office was in Israel just last week and made that abundantly clear then.

**Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** With the United States wishing to continue its military presence on Diego Garcia for a further 20 years, what discussions is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office planning to have
with Washington about helping to facilitate the right of return of the Chagos islanders to the British Indian Ocean Territory?

James Duddridge: We have made it clear that we want the US presence to continue, but the Government have not yet held discussions with the US about continuing that arrangement. I very much welcomed discussing the issues with my hon. Friend a few weeks ago in connection with the all-party group visit to the Foreign Office. I will continue to liaise with him when the Government come to a conclusion, following the KPMG report and the consultation.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Following yesterday’s drop in the value of sterling, what other implications does the Foreign and Commonwealth Office anticipate for Britain and Northern Ireland as a result of the uncertainty around the referendum?

Mr Philip Hammond: Uncertainty always has a cost to business. Business hates uncertainty, and the markets will reflect it. That is why it is right to hold the referendum at the earliest possible date—23 June—and settle this issue once and for all so that Britain can get on with Britain’s business.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): When I canvass the streets of Newark for the local elections, people ask me about the views of my local councillors on refuse collection or on potholes on Newark’s roads. I rarely hear them ask me their views on foreign policy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that foreign policy is set by the Foreign Secretary and by the Government and should be debated in this House—not by our town halls—so we should all support the Government’s action against boycotts and sanctions?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. One of my colleagues has just reminded me that my hon. Friend is not the only one who pounded the pavements of Newark. I think everyone on these Benches did so. Yes, foreign policy is, of course, a matter for the Government of the United Kingdom, and it is the business of this Parliament. It is very important that we have a single foreign policy, which is clearly projected so that Britain’s position in the world is understood and strengthened.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Demand always massively exceeds supply at Question Time, especially at Foreign Office questions. We do not really have time, but I am allowing time for one last question. I call Mr Richard Burden.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): May I press the Foreign Secretary further on the answer he gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts)? Is there anything in World Trade Organisation or other rules that fetters a public institution’s ability to act on the advice that the FCO puts on its website, which my hon. Friend quoted?

Mr Hammond: Public bodies in this country are bound by the EU procurement directive in their purchasing activity and must follow those rules.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to disappoint colleagues, but at least we know that there is huge interest in what the Foreign Office does and says. We will have to leave it there for today.
Mental Health Taskforce

12.37 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health to make a statement on the Government’s response to the final report of the independent Mental Health Taskforce.

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): Achieving parity of esteem for mental and physical health remains a priority for this Government. I appreciate the hon. Lady’s raising of the urgent question this afternoon. We welcomed the independent Mental Health Taskforce launched by NHS England last year, with its remit to explore the variation in the availability of mental health services across England, to look at the outcomes for people who are using services, and to identify key priorities for improvement.

The taskforce, chaired by Paul Farmer, chief executive of Mind—I thank him, the vice-chair, Jacqui Dyer, and the whole team for the remarkable work they did—also considered ways of promoting positive mental health and wellbeing, ways of improving the physical health of people with mental health problems, and whether we are spending money and time on the right things.

The publication of the taskforce’s report earlier this month marked the first time a national strategy has been designed in partnership with all the health-related arm’s length bodies in order to deliver change across the system. This also demonstrated the remarkable way in which society, the NHS and this House now regard mental health and how it should be seen and approached.

This Government have made great strides in the way we think about and treat mental health in this country. We have given the NHS more money than ever before and are introducing access and waiting-time targets for the first time. We have made it clear that local NHS services must follow our lead by increasing the amount they spend on mental health and making sure that beds are always available. Despite those improvements, however—and I referred earlier to the way in which we view these matters—the taskforce pulled no punches. It produced a frank assessment of the state of current mental health care throughout the NHS, pointing out that one in four people would experience a mental health problem during their lifetime, and that the cost of mental ill health to the economy, the NHS and society was £105 billion a year.

We can all agree that the human and financial cost of inadequate care is unacceptable. The Department of Health therefore welcomes the report’s publication, and will work with NHS England and other partners to establish a plan for implementing its recommendations. To make those recommendations a reality, we will spend an extra £1 billion by 2020-21 to improve access to mental health services, so that people can receive the right care in the right place when they need it most. That will mean increasing the number of people completing talking therapies by nearly three quarters, from 468,000 to 800,000; more than doubling the number of pregnant women or new mothers receiving mental health support, from 12,000 to 42,000 a year; training about 1,700 new therapists; and helping 29,000 more people to find or stay in work through individual placement support and talking therapies.

I assure all Members that they will have ample opportunities to ask questions and debate issues as we work together to implement the taskforce’s recommendations.

Luciana Berger: The final report of the Mental Health Taskforce, commissioned by NHS England, provides a frank assessment of the state of mental health care, and describes a system that is “ruining” some people’s lives. It contains a number of recommendations which, if implemented in full, could make a significant difference to services that have had to contend with funding cuts and staff shortages at a time of rising demand, leaving too many vulnerable people without the right care and support.

It is extremely disappointing that the Opposition have had to compel the Minister to come to the Chamber today to ensure that Parliament can give the report and the Government’s response to it the attention and scrutiny that they deserve. It is all the more regrettable because the Prime Minister himself chose to announce their response to the media during last week’s recess—a courtesy which, had it not been for the urgent question, would still not have been afforded to the House. The Government’s apparent announcements included the announcement of a supposed “additional” £1 billion of investment by 2020, but a number of vital questions remain unanswered.

Will the Minister explain why the report was delayed and published during the recess? Did Ministers or No. 10 have a say in the timing, and, if so, does the Minister accept that such a level of interference on the part of Ministers raises questions about the independence of the report? Can the Minister confirm that no additional money will be allocated from the Treasury to fund what the Government have announced, and that it will be funded from the £8 billion that has already been set aside for the NHS to receive by 2020? Given that mental health is given just under 10% of the total NHS budget, surely mental health services would have expected to receive much of that additional money as part of the NHS settlement anyway. Can the Minister explain how the money can be expected to deliver the “transformation” in our mental health services that the taskforce says is urgently required?

Can the Minister also confirm that he is accepting all the recommendations relating to the NHS? Does he intend to respond to the other recommendations, and when can we expect that response? As the report makes clear, we do not solve the challenges of our nation’s mental health by means of the Department of Health.

On behalf of the many thousands of people who have been let down by the Government, who are desperate to see a change in the way in which we approach mental health, and who are owed a full explanation from the Government of their response to this damning report, I look forward to the Minister’s reply.

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions, which give me an opportunity to say still more about what we are doing in relation to mental health and how far it has come since 2010. For instance, she could have
pointed out that 1,400 more people a day have access to mental health treatment than had access to it in that year, simply as a matter of comparison between what was then and what is now. However, it is absolutely right to make the essential point that there is more to be done—a view that we share—and that is what the report did.

The timing of the report was not up to the Government. It is an independent report, commissioned by the NHS from an independent taskforce, and the timing and the content were decided by the taskforce. I had the occasional meeting with Paul Farmer about it. I made sure to speak to him to say, “This is absolutely your report. Forget the guff in the papers about who wants what in the report and all that; this is yours and it’s got to be yours”—and it is absolutely clear that it was. The decision to publish it was theirs. The Prime Minister was able to respond, which was great, and that emphasises again the importance given to this issue now, as compared with times past.

On the finance, the important thing to note is that the Prime Minister announced in January how the £600 million in the spending review, which is included in the NHS bottom line until 2021, would be spent. That included the new money for perinatal mental health, crisis care, psychiatric liaison in A&E and the crisis care community work. What was said by the Prime Minister in relation to the taskforce report represents new money that will be available for the NHS and mental health by 2021. That will be £1 billion extra by 2021, with the additional number of people to be treated that I outlined.

I spoke to the taskforce after the issuing of the report. I do not particularly want just to produce a response to the taskforce report; I said that I would prefer a series of rolling responses, as it were, so that when we have responded to a recommendation and when we are moving on and delivering on it, I would say so. That will come in a variety of different forms, but will be related to what the taskforce has done. That may well involve announcements to Parliament, whether by written ministerial statements or other means. I did not want one big bang of a response, as it were, because the Prime Minister has already said that we will accept the recommendations, as they go with the grain of what the Government were going to do anyway. I wanted to give an indication that the report will not just sit on a shelf gathering dust. By making constant reference to it, we will do more; we will continue to work together to do more, and I welcome the hon. Lady and her team’s very regular pressure on me and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to continue to do more. We will meet that challenge—and we are meeting it in a way that no Government have ever met it before.

**Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con):** I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the whole of the Government health team on their personal commitment to this issue. Does my right hon. Friend accept that those who suffer from mental ill health are often poor advocates of their own cause, and that it is very easy for money to be diverted into other areas of healthcare spending where others are able to shout louder for the money? Will he and his Front-Bench team consider whether it is possible to ring-fence the NHS budget for mental health care so that it does not become the Cinderella subject in the future that it has been too often in the past?

**Alistair Burt:** Thank you very much. No Government have ever done what we have done; we have met the challenge, which was great, and that emphasises again the importance given to this issue now, as compared with times past.

**Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP):** All of us in the House welcome the strides made in changing the stigma around mental health, and people have been brave enough to speak out. In Scotland, we had the “See me” campaign, which was about seeing the person, not the condition.

Despite all the great talk, the money has often not gone to the services. Mental health trusts suffered a 2% cut in their budget between 2013 and 2015, and the number of psychiatric nurses decreased by 1.4%. The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) talked about money often ending up somewhere else, and we must avoid that. We need also to focus on children, because one in 10 of our children suffer from mental health problems between the ages of five and 16, and they are waiting a very long time to get help. We face the same challenge in Scotland. We measure it, we know how difficult it is to deal with, and we have managed to improve things by increasing staff and funding, but we also have a long road to walk.
One thing we are not doing enough is thinking about the whole spread of mental health support out into the community and about the way people work: people having insecure jobs; and people struggling to keep a roof over their head. Later, we are going to debate welfare reforms, and mental health issues arise from that. Three times as many poor children will have a mental health issue as children who are in a stable and well-financed family. Are we not going to try to join up our decisions and look at our other policy areas, in terms of how people work, how people are supported, and the mental health suffering that comes from the lack of that?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her usual well-informed contribution to the debate on these issues, and for what she says about stigma and the general approach the Government have been taking. She is absolutely right about that. We have supported the Time to Change anti-stigma campaign, which has had some success, although we have to do more.

The hon. Lady is also right about children and wider cross-government work. On children and young people, for the first time we have a Minister in the Department for Education in England who has responsibilities for mental health, and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) is here to demonstrate that we take those cross-government responsibilities very seriously. One way in which we are going to manage the response to the taskforce is by having a cross-governmental team to make sure that Departments are joined up. Housing has something to do with this, as do education and work and pensions, as the hon. Lady said. We will make sure that that is done. I should have said, but did not do so for reasons of time, that what has been said by the taskforce and what the Prime Minister has said is in addition to the £1.25 billion announced in March for the development of the child and adolescent mental health services in England and the £30 million a year eating disorder work, in child and adolescent mental health services in England a billion announced in March for the development of the Prime Minister has said is in addition to the £1.25 billion announced in March for the development of the child and adolescent mental health services in England and the £30 million a year eating disorder work, in child and adolescent mental health services in England.

Alistair Burt: Yes, I thank my hon. Friend for that. I join the Minister in thanking the college, so I thank them for that. It is very important to track this money. The CCG assessment framework will help us to do that through the health service. The money that the Prime Minister announced in relation to community crisis care—the extra £400 million announced in January—will be spent throughout the community, and it is essential that we track it.

There has been a data lack; the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) knows about that well, because I answer far too many of her questions by saying, “This information is not collected” or, “This information is not collected centrally”. I have noticed that. We are in the process of changing that situation; the dataset was in the process of being changed and more information will be available. In order to track things properly, we have to have the information available. The question is right and we are improving the data. It is important to track this, both in local authority work and in NHS work.

Mr Speaker: I know that the right hon. Gentleman will take it in the right spirit when I say that it is immensely encouraging that he notices his own answers.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Parity of esteem and extra resources are important, but one of the main messages from this report is that we need to hard-wire mental health and well-being into public policy. Twice as many people take their own lives as are killed on our roads each year. Does the Minister agree that it is now time for a national campaign to address this issue?

Alistair Burt: Yes, I do, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and for his work and interest in this area. Included in the taskforce’s recommendations is a national ambition to reduce by 10% the number of suicides—that would be a reduction of some 400 a year. Three areas are already piloting a “zero suicide ambition strategy”, and this probably needs to be given more prominence than it has been. A national suicide prevention strategy is in place, which I am reviewing to see how it can be better implemented locally, because not all local areas have a similar strategy. It is right that that gets extra prominence, and we had a debate on it not too long ago in Westminster Hall. We recognise that it is a significant issue for men in particular, because three times as many men as women take their own lives. The recent increase in the number of women doing so, which was noted just a few weeks ago, is also significant. It is important that we talk about this more, recognise that suicide is not inevitable, and have a national ambition to challenge it and do more. I am confident that the hon. Gentleman will be able to champion that work, just as he has championed other things.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is a very sad fact that in healthcare those professionals who add the most to the service do not necessarily receive the same acclamation as those working in more glamorous specialties. What does the Minister think can be done to improve the status of those working in mental healthcare and thus mental healthcare as an attractive career option?

Alistair Burt: That is a good question. It is very important that true value is given to those who work in such an area, at all levels. When we have seen examples of poor-quality care and the tragedies that have occurred,
we realise the value placed on those who display kindness as well as skill and demonstrate their qualifications. We need to talk about the quality of good care. We need to make sure that people who go into these professions have a career path, whatever their entry level. We want to encourage greater psychiatric awareness in medical training and clinical medical training for those who are leaving medical schools. Again, I know that Simon Wessely of the royal college has done much work in this area. We should emphasise that those who care for those in the most distressed situations, be they in hospital, community or specialist services, deserve our thanks, encouragement and proper training. Increased money for training is included in the package that the Government will be working on, and it will be a vital part of that.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Two weeks ago, the Minister kindly came to Hull to talk to parents who are campaigning to get an in-patient facility for children and young people in the Hull area, as the previous one was closed several years ago. Will he update my constituents about any progress in the past two weeks and about whether any of the £1 billion allocated to mental health services will be used in Hull?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. It was good to see her in Hull with her constituents and those of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson). I do not think that any new money is specifically needed to deliver on the commitment to provide in-patient care for young people in Hull and the surrounding area. It seemed to me that people had already agreed on that; the problem was in the delivery of it. She will recall the frustration that I expressed when I was sitting round a table with representatives from the clinical commissioning group, the NHS and the trust, because for some reason it was impossible for us to reach a decision.

The update is that I have already taken that matter away with me to consider how to resolve it, because I had some concern about it. A national decision has to be made about the allocation of finance and priorities, but there is a clear local need that needs to be addressed. We will make progress on that. On beds generally, we have more beds for young people than ever before, and 50 more since I came into my role, but they are not there in the right places, as we saw in the hon. Lady’s constituency. I do not think that anything in the announcement affects the importance of that matter, which has already been recognised.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I warmly welcome the Government’s initiative and the taskforce report. I am slightly disappointed by the Opposition’s rather churlish tone, as I thought this was a cross-party matter.

May I make two brief pleas to the Minister? First, we must not lose sight of acute mental health episodes among children and young people at weekends and out of hours, which is a long-standing issue, including in my constituency. Secondly, Tourette’s syndrome falls between the strategies and provision of education and health. One in 100 children are diagnosed with Tourette’s. It is an important neurological condition that we need to address. Will the Minister keep focused on that as part of his wider mental health review?

Alistair Burt: Absolutely. Attention is now being paid to crisis care in A&E, which recognises the fact that people who need urgent treatment will go to A&E. The Government are determined to ensure that there is emergency access 24/7 by placing more psychiatric liaison teams in hospitals and by improving crisis care in the community. My hon. Friend is right to recognise the problem. A number of syndromes and issues have particular qualities associated with them that need individual care, and he is right to raise his concerns about those who suffer from Tourette’s.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The taskforce emphasises the importance of supported housing for people with mental health problems. I think it is right to say that the Minister’s Department made no representations to the Treasury before the changes to housing benefit for tenants in supported housing were announced. It had made no official representations to other Departments as recently as three weeks ago. Will the Minister now make the case to his colleagues in the Departments for Communities and Local Government and for Work and Pensions on the need to exempt vulnerable people from the changes in housing benefit?

Alistair Burt: I understand the right hon. Lady’s point. I know that such issues are being considered extremely carefully by those who are responsible for developing the policy, but I will ensure that her further concerns are noted and that the Departments recognise them.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): There is so much good stuff in this report that I must congratulate the authors on their work and my right hon. Friend the Minister on his interest. I particularly welcome the recognition in the report of the gap in the provision of psychiatric liaison services, and the commitment to have such services at the core 24/7 level in at least half of all hospitals by 2020. Will my right hon. Friend advise me on whether such provision is fully funded? Given the difficulties of getting such services in place at the moment, will he take a close interest in the plan to make it happen in practice?

Alistair Burt: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for her interest in this subject, which she had expressed to me previously, and her work on it. Yes, our determination is that the extra £1 billion a year that will be spent on mental health services will cover the training and the commitment that we have made to 24/7 cover. It is very important that such cover is there. The issue was identified when the Care Quality Commission looked at the work of the mental health crisis care concordat, which has been so successful in its first 12 or 18 months. I can assure her that I am determined to ensure that we provide these facilities.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The report adds to the consensus that arose from Lord Crisp’s commission and the cross-party work led by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on ending the practice of out-of-area treatments. Will the Minister commit to putting a timetable on that process so that we might know when it will happen?
Alistair Burt: The taskforce recommendation is that out-of-area placements should be eliminated by 2020; Lord Crisp’s report said 2017. I would like to see it done as soon as is reasonably practicable. We want to ensure that, where possible, people can be treated locally, as it makes a real difference. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) mentioned one or two cases of young people being treated some way away, and the impact that it has had on them. They lose local community links and the community work that can be done to assist them. We all want to see that ended, and I want it to be done as soon as possible. It will certainly be done within the taskforce’s recommended timescale. If it can be done any quicker locally, area by area, I will be very happy.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I welcome the Government’s positive response to the taskforce report. Although effective acute care is vital, prevention is better than cure. Will the Government look at ongoing training for all GPs in mental health so that all patients can have access to early diagnosis, care and treatment, to prevent problems from escalating?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend makes a good point. GPs are often contacted first when a problem is developing, as I know from my contacts with the British Medical Association and with the Royal College of General Practitioners, which was also very interested in the taskforce report. Those organisations want to ensure that doctors have enough training, because training levels tend to vary according to interest. I know that all GPs are concerned about the matter and want to ensure that they have the skills. Equally, they need to know that they can then refer to the right place. That is what the increased support for both emergency and community services is all about. It is to ensure that there are proper pathways so that people do not get stuck at any particular stage.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My 15-year-old constituent Matthew Garnett, who has autism, has spent the past six months in a psychiatric intensive care unit 30 miles from home. The unit does not have the specialism to meet Matthew’s needs and he has deteriorated significantly. The specialist bed that Matthew needs is in Northampton, where Matthew’s family have been told there are five young people who are ready for discharge but whose ongoing care cannot be arranged. Clearly, there is a crisis in mental healthcare for children and adolescents. When will the Minister intervene to secure the bed that Matthew Garnett so desperately needs?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. If she wants to make a particular approach on that case, I am ready to listen.

Helen Hayes: I have already done that.

Alistair Burt: It is already in the works. Okay, thank you. Let me say a couple of things with regard to specialist care. First, even though we want most young people to have access to care close to home, there will always be some specialist care that will require out-of-area treatment—perhaps those are the circumstances to which the hon. Lady is referring. It is then a question of getting the place.

That issue emphasises why it is so important to have the community care available. We need to be able to discharge patients and put in place a proper care package. That is precisely what the taskforce considered and made recommendations on. That work is already ongoing. As my time in office has shown me, there are variations in practice in different places. Discharges are handled better in some areas than in others. The practice of the best must become the practice for all. Everything must be done to ensure that people are treated in the appropriate place at the appropriate time, and keeping people in hospital unnecessarily is not what anyone wants. That work is already going on, and I will make sure that the hon. Lady gets an answer to her particular question.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s personal commitment to this issue and the Government’s investment in this area, which demonstrates the importance of mental health issues alongside physical health in the NHS. Will the Minister clarify how he will hold the NHS to account so that the money is spent on additional mental health services as opposed to just being frittered away?

Alistair Burt: The engagement of the NHS with the taskforce needs to be recognised and emphasised. The NHS set up the taskforce because it wanted to be clear about the state of mental health services and take a five-year forward view. That is what the taskforce does, but it goes beyond that to say that it has a 10-year vision, which I welcome. Not everything can be done in neat, parliamentary-cycle chunks, so it is important that people have a continuing sense of commitment. The certainty that my hon. Friend wants is demonstrated by the involvement of the NHS, the endorsement of the recommendation by the chief executive, and the work on transparency, which is important to us, to make sure that we can all see where money has been spent. That should hold clinical commissioning groups and the NHS to account on the expenditure issue.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Paul Farmer’s report highlights the fact that 50% of diagnoses of mental health challenges are made by the age of 14, and 75% are made by the age of 24. He also says in the report: “Yet most children and young people get no support.” Will the Minister explain what specific work will be undertaken to look at prevention and early intervention, including early diagnosis?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her interest and her considerable knowledge of these issues, which she has raised a number of times. There are two things to say. First, on expenditure on children and young people’s mental health services, £1.25 billion will be spent over the next five years to improve the baseline for child and adolescent mental health services, including early prevention. I would also mention the full roll-out of IAPT—improving access to psychological therapies—services for children by 2018. That is already in place for, I think, 70% of the country, and it will be completed by 2018. It is a way of ensuring.
that children have early access to the psychological therapies that they need. That is an important development, which I hope the hon. Lady welcomes.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on mental health, I very much welcome the report, as Members in all parts of the House should. There is a high-quality public debate about mental health, in which we are addressing stigma, and the Prime Minister has made two speeches in the past three weeks about mental health, setting out the Government’s priorities. Does the Minister agree that there is a unique opportunity for him and the Government to drive forward real, quality change in mental health?

Alistair Burt: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that he has done as chair of the all-party group, and indeed to all colleagues in the House who have raised these issues over a period of time and, partly as a result of their personal experiences and their bravery in talking about them, have helped in the process in which we are engaged.

Yes, we have a great opportunity. The taskforce has set out a 10-year vision, and there is a commitment from the NHS. At the top level, in all parts of the House, there is a commitment to the issue, and I hope that we will have an opportunity to develop the services that people want and for which, in all honesty, they have waited too long.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I welcome the taskforce report and the Government’s response. The Minister indicated that £1 billion would be made available by 2021. What is the relationship between that and the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and are there any Barnett consequentials?

Alistair Burt: Although I read the answers to my own questions, I cannot recall one on that point, so the hon. Gentleman has caught me out. I genuinely do not know the answer, so I will write to him about the devolved Administrations or place an answer in the Library. I think we are talking about responsibility in England, because this is a devolved matter, but there is good, close co-operation between officials on the development of mental health services in the devolved Administrations, which will certainly continue. I will make sure that an answer on the finances is placed in the Library.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman has a long-standing interest in these issues. He is absolutely right: in England, a pilot project with 27 schools is being run by the Department for Education to locate and identify a single point of contact in those schools on mental health. Depending on the results, more projects can be rolled out. Early identification and support in school are absolutely essential, and that work is under way.

There are a number of different initiatives, sometimes inspired by people who have experienced personal tragedy in their own family. They realise that the tragedy that has befallen their young person might not have happened if their friends had been more aware of their circumstances, or if the school or college had been more aware. We look at all those different initiatives to see how best practice can be spread, but the hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the Minister and the Government on their commitment to this. He has just spoken about best practice. Last month in Stafford we held a round table on mental health. One of the issues that came up was that there were a lot of good local initiatives, both in the public and the non-governmental organisation sector, but sometimes they did not know about each other. Will he point us to best practice in the sector?
Alistair Burt: I am happy to do so, and I welcome my hon. Friend’s question. As I indicated earlier, something that has perplexed me since I have been in this role is the variation in practice in different places. It has never been easier to transfer information by electronic means and make people aware of best practice, but it is still difficult to move things around. We need to make sure that there is a website—a clearing house—for ideas in such areas.

Luciana Berger: It already exists in the Positive Practice collaborative.

Alistair Burt: Absolutely. We need to make sure that we have proper ways to access all the different ideas. A lot of work has gone into this, and we need to make sure that it is easy to access different ideas. There is a lot going on, and a lot can be done in relation to spreading best practice.

Mr Speaker: I gently remind the House that exchanges in the Chamber are not a private conversation. It is quite important, from the vantage point of those who take a full and complete record of our proceedings, that they can hear what is said.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Sorry?

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that helpful interjection from a sedentary position.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): The Minister welcomed the work of the taskforce and its comprehensive report. I agree entirely. He said that he would seek to implement the measures in a rolling programme, but can we infer from that that he is committed to implementing all the measures and that he fully accepts all the recommendations?

Alistair Burt: Yes, we have indicated that we accept all the recommendations by the taskforce. I would like to roll out responses to them over a period of time so that they are regularly brought back to the House. Our commitment to expenditure, training and dealing with the recommendations is clear.

Mr Speaker, you would not want to hear all the private conversations that go on on the Floor of the House, nor would those who report our proceedings, but I see the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) so often at events such as this that it is not unnatural that we have the odd exchange over the Dispatch Box.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I declare an interest as a registered clinical psychologist. I thank the Minister for his commitment and the taskforce for its informative report. In considering mental health across the lifespan, the report highlights the fact that 40% of people living in care homes are affected by depression, which contributes to morbidity. Alongside medical and social care, will the Minister commit to funding specialists in older adult psychological treatment, to address the growing mental health needs of our population?

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her work in this area, for her commitment to this area since she has been in the House, and for being at the National Autistic Society event last night, where she again demonstrated that interest. May I look at the suggestion that she makes? It is well recognised that with the growing incidence of dementia and other issues, and with those in care homes being increasingly frail, there will of course be a need for further specialised work. May I look at that area in particular and come back to her in due course?
**Short Money**

1.21 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Leader of the House to make a statement on the Government consultation on Short money.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): I am happy to confirm that since we last discussed this topic on the day the House rose for recess, we have completed the steps I promised at the time. On Friday 12 February I tabled the statutory instrument required to change the allocations of policy development grants to fund political parties, in line with the recommended changes put forward by the independent Electoral Commission. Last Thursday the Deputy Leader of the House and I tabled a request for views about potential similar changes to Short money. I hope the House will therefore appreciate why I am responding to this urgent question.

The parallels between policy development grants and Short money—both forms of taxpayer funding for political parties—are strong and, since Short money is larger and more valuable than policy development grants, it seems sensible to take a similar approach. The request for views asks some important questions. For example, the cost of Short money has gone up by 50% since 2010, and will rise by a whopping 68% by the end of this Parliament if nothing is done. At a time when everybody else outside Westminster has had to tighten their belts, why should politicians expect to be treated differently, feathering their own nests at taxpayers’ expense?

The rises in Short money are linked to the retail prices index inflation every year, but benefits claimants get rises linked to the lower consumer prices index inflation each year, so how can any politician look their constituent in the eye and say that they deserve a bigger rise every year than someone who is looking for a job or is on a pension or living with a disability?

The rises in Short money are also linked to the number of votes cast at elections. That has contributed this year to an enormous 30% increase, from £7.25 million in 2014-15 to almost £9.5 million this year. How can that be justified when many vital public services are having to cope with cuts of 19%? Short money is notably untransparent. It is taxpayers’ money after all, but there is no requirement to publish details of how it is spent. There are, rightly, requirements, on the parallel policy development grants and on pretty much every other area of Government funding, too. How can it be right in the modern age for politicians to expect to be bunged a load of hard-earned taxpayers’ cash—more than £35 million in total since 2010 for the Labour party, for example—without at least explaining how it gets spent?

Finally, the distribution of Short money between parties throws up some pretty odd results. For example, UKIP gets £688,000 for its one MP, although the hon. Member for Clacton (Mr Carswell) has in an impressively principled stand, turned some of that down. The Greens, also with one MP, get less than a third of that. Clearly, it makes sense to ask whether that can be improved.

These important questions need to be answered. The request for views runs until 7 March so there is plenty of time for everyone on all sides of the House to submit their views and opinions, and there will be plenty of time for us to debate these issues here or in Westminster Hall if anyone wants to do so. We are already off to a flying start with this second urgent question, and I will take contributions from everybody here today in the spirit of constructive submissions and suggestions in answer to the questions that the request for views has raised.

Chris Bryant: That is all very well, but Short money has nothing to do with the Cabinet Office. It is House business, not Government business. The whole point is that it enables Parliament to do its business properly. The accounting officer is not the permanent secretary of the Cabinet Office, but the Clerk of the House. The Leader of the House should be here doing his job properly and answering questions.

Can this Minister confirm that any changes will have to be debated, and voted on, on the Floor of the House? Can he confirm that because this is House business, it will not be subject to a Government Whip? This is the shadiest so-called consultation I have ever come across. It deliberately forgets to mention that Short money is linked to how many seats and how many votes all the Opposition parties got at a general election, so the main reason Short money has increased in 2015 is that this Government have a much smaller majority than the Labour Government or the coalition Government, and the Opposition parties got more seats and more votes than in previous Parliaments.

Can the Minister confirm that, contrary to what he says, this is not a 19% cut? With inflation, it is a 24% cut. How can that be right when the Chancellor has increased the cost of his political office to the taxpayer by 204%? Or is there one rule for the Opposition and quite another for the Government?

The Minister said last time that the cost and number of taxpayer-funded Tory special advisers—the only bit of this that he is responsible for—is coming down, but that is not true either, is it? Since the general election that figure has gone up, so will the Government be taking a 19% cut on 1 April? No, I do not suppose they will.

The consultation, published in the half-term recess—the Minister should be ashamed of himself—allows just 11 working days for responses, and then seems to intend to implement a decision less than three weeks later. Will that give the two Conservative-chaired Select Committees that have expressed an interest in doing inquiries time to complete those inquiries? I do not suppose it will. That is another affront to this House.

Fair-minded people will conclude that the Government are developing a nasty authoritarian streak, and that an overweening Executive wants to crush all opposition because they are afraid of scrutiny. When we were in government we trebled Short money and the Tories did not hesitate to bank £46 million, so we will not take any lessons from the Minister. When I was Deputy Leader of the House in 2009, some people suggested that we should cut Short money for the Conservative party because other Departments in Government were facing significant cuts. We said, “No, democracy is worth protecting.” This is not a consultation on cutting the cost of politics—we would welcome that. It is a pernicious ultimatum and the Government should withdraw it unless they are prepared to put Spads on the table as
well. To quote the Minister, why should the Government be treated any differently from the Opposition? Feathering their own nest—that is what they are doing.

John Penrose: I am happy to reassure the hon. Gentleman that the cost of Spads, as I mentioned when we last met to discuss this, has fallen since the general election. The request for views is entirely clear about the various different causes of the rise in Short money, and the consultation asks for views and expressions of how it might be amended point by point, so the hon. Gentleman is quite wrong about how the request for views is done.

Even if no changes are made to some of the proposals in the request for views, the Labour party will still receive more funding in real terms than did the Conservative party in 2009-10. It will receive an estimated £11 million of taxpayers’ money over this Parliament. There will be no real reduction in cash terms; in fact, there will be a small increase in cash terms, even after a 19% cut, compared with 2014-15. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

John Penrose: I was hoping for a more constructive response. I was hoping for a more balanced response. I was hoping for a set of proposals I could use as a response to the request for views. I am afraid that that is not what we have had, and I deeply regret that. I hope there is still time for us to move forward in a more constructive fashion.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for launching a consultation, which, I have to confess, seemed to be lacking earlier in the process, so that is obviously a step forward. It is legitimate to ask whether it costs more or less to run an Opposition depending on how big the Government’s majority is. The official Opposition have a function that should be carried out regardless of the number of seats they have. I assure my hon. Friend that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee will continue to take an interest in this matter, although I hope it can be resolved rather more consensually than in today’s exchanges.

John Penrose: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for those comments and particularly for his final point about trying to resolve these issues more consensually. I look forward to any conclusions his Committee arrives at. I completely agree that it must make sense at least to ask, and to request views about, what the proper cost of running an Opposition—the official Opposition or, indeed, some of the other opposition parties—should be. That does not necessarily vary depending on the number of votes cast at an election, which is something the current system requires, for example.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I declare an interest as the national secretary of the Scottish National party. It is a good thing that a consultation is taking place, but why limit it just to political parties? Why not extend it to the public and other stakeholders who might have an interest? There is nothing wrong in principle with reducing the cost of politics, so can we get some assurances on reducing the number and cost of special advisers and, indeed, of Members of the House of Lords? Given the proximity of the end of the financial year, when will the Government be in a position to confirm to the parties and the staff they employ what the settlement will be?

John Penrose: Obviously, the conclusions of the request for views will depend on what views are expressed, and I do not want to prejudge that. We will, however, want to move promptly and swiftly to make sure that any staff who might be affected by any changes that are announced have the maximum time for planning and that there is certainty as soon as there can be.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I regard Short money as a critical part of our democracy, but given the realistic comparison with special advisers, and the steps the Government have taken to have transparency in the publication of senior special advisers’ salaries, does the Minister not think it appropriate for the Opposition to show greater transparency in the salaries of their senior appointed researchers?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend, who was involved with administering Short money and policy development grants before he came into the House, knows whereof he speaks. He is right that it is essential that we demand the same transparency for taxpayers’ money in all areas. That should include not just the cost of Spads, which is already transparent, but, equally, policy development grants and Short money.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I have no problem at all with the transparency that has just been asked for. The Minister is a decent man, but I think he has been tasked with doing someone else’s dirty business. What he is proposing is not actually about the cost of politics; if it were, he would also propose a cut in the budget for special advisers. This is actually about gagging the Opposition. Will he scrap this rushed consultation, abandon the attack on the scrutiny of the Government, and look again at how the cost of politics can be reduced by, for instance, chopping the budget for special advisers?

John Penrose: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind comments about me, and as a member of the Whips Office with him in the last Government, I reciprocate, of course. He is right that there are other ways of cutting the cost of politics. For example, we have in front of us proposals to reduce the total number of MPs in this House. I would not, therefore, want to limit what we plan to do just to Short money, but we should not let that be the enemy of doing the right thing on this issue either. Therefore, it is essential that we proceed with these proposals, and I hope we can rely on the right hon. Gentleman’s support.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Having had a hand in the creation of the policy development grant, and having argued vigorously for Short money increases when the Conservative party was in opposition, I will have to look carefully before arguing for anything other than that this decision to make such a substantial cut needs to be reconsidered. It certainly seems unacceptable that it is being introduced in one year. Everybody understands the need for financial stringency, and for
this House to take its share of reductions, but could the Minister at least look at whether this reduction can be phased? Could he also carefully examine the point that has been made about special advisers, whose numbers have grown enormously? The Labour Government bequeathed about 80, and the coalition Government got up to about 110, although the number has been reduced a little recently. Still, those numbers are very large. Those people do provide a lot of political assistance to the Government, and there is—although not a symmetry—a relationship between the two numbers. Looking at Short money in isolation would be a mistake.

John Penrose: May I start by reassuring my right hon. Friend that we are talking not about a cut, but about a slower rise? The cost of Short money has already risen by 50% since 2010, which is a significant amount. We are talking about reducing the rise, which, if nothing were done, would continue to ratchet up between now and the end of the Parliament. I would also say to him that the total salary bill for Spads is still lower than the total cost of Government funding for policy development grants, Short money and other areas of expenditure. Therefore, while I agree that the two things are not directly comparable, there is some symmetry. I hope he is reassured by the fact that the Spad salary bill is much lower overall than the bill for the total funding of Opposition parties.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Will the Minister clarify his thinking on policy development grants and how it ties in with the views of the Electoral Commission?

John Penrose: The House will be aware that the independent Electoral Commission has undertaken a fairly careful consultation over some time and has made some recommendations. The statutory instrument I mentioned in my initial remarks implements some of those, but not all as yet. We are holding off on deciding how we proceed with the remainder of the recommendations until we have the results of the expression of views. Given the obvious parallels between Short money and policy development grant, we thought it was sensible to make sure we had one set of answers before we proceeded with the other recommendations.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): The cost of Short money has increased by 68% cumulatively since 2010. Is that really justifiable at a time when councils of all colours are making very large efficiency savings? Surely, taxpayer-funded political parties can do the same.

John Penrose: I could not agree more. People outside this place—outside the Westminster bubble—who are looking at our discussions today will not understand why politicians feel that they should treat themselves separately and as a special case. Those people will look at what has happened to their budgets over the last five or six years and say, “What is sauce for the goose should be sauce for the political gander as well.”

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Setting aside for a moment the outrageous detail of the request for views, will the Minister tell the House what effect a cut in Short money would have on scrutiny and on the comfort, or discomfort, the Executive feel as they go about their business?

John Penrose: As I mentioned, the amount of Short money has gone up by 50% since 2010, so Opposition parties have a great deal more money with which to do their job than they did before. I refer the hon. Gentleman back to the comment made when we last considered this issue, about 10 days ago, by the hon. Member for Clacton, who pointed out that the costs of research and many other political functions are now potentially lower. Given what is being asked of many Departments and local authorities, it is certainly reasonable to ask people to work more efficiently in future.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I think the public will be astonished that full accounts do not have to be published in this age of transparency. How is the Minister going to put that right?

John Penrose: I devoutly hope that the result of this process will be an increase in transparency. We already have improved transparency in pretty much every other area of taxpayer-funded spending, and we already have transparency that is far better than that for Short money on policy development grants—a very similar kind of grant. It would therefore be increasingly out of step with the modern world for us to assume that Short money should somehow be magically exempt.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I would challenge the Minister, because I do not see this money as being for politicians; it is for our staff and our support teams. It is essential that we have those staff and support teams so that we deliver, and deliver well, for our constituents and the people we serve. Transparency is not an issue. None of us in this House, as far as I am aware, will dispute the need for transparency, and any moves towards transparency would be broadly supported. However, the problem is that my arithmetic seems to have gone awry. My figures tell me that in 2010 the Chancellor employed four special advisers, at a total cost of £230,000, and today he employs 10 special advisers at a total cost of £700,000. That is a 204% increase, according to my arithmetic; perhaps I am wrong. How can the Minister defend a 24% cut to those of us who are trying to make things work and a 204% rise for those in the Chancellor’s office? The Chancellor’s Spad team now costs more than the total cost of policy development grant given to all of us on these Benches—DUP, Plaid Cymru, SNP and SDLP Members. The Chancellor gets more than we get.

John Penrose: As I said, the cost of special advisers has fallen since the last general election. I would just point out that Gordon Brown, when he was Chancellor, had more Spads than the current Chancellor, and that the average salary of a special adviser is currently £2,000 less than it was under Gordon Brown’s Government in 2009.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Short money, quite rightly, exists to enable Opposition parties to undertake scrutiny and parliamentary duties. Many of my constituents will therefore find it hard to understand the funding received by Sinn Féin when its Members neither attend this House nor participate in its activities. Will my hon. Friend undertake to look at this anomaly?
John Penrose: For a long time, the funding received by Sinn Féin has been treated as a separate but parallel consideration, subject to a separate resolution of this House. I would expect that to continue and for it to receive separate, special consideration as a result.

Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): I welcome the Government’s announcement that they will be cutting Short money, and I urge Ministers to stick to their guns and not to retreat. The sight of special pleading from political parties wanting to get their hands on taxpayers’ cash is disgraceful. I urge Ministers not only to slash Short money but to insist that all political parties publish fully audited accounts of what they spend it on, as my party will at the end of this year, so that we can see the hotel bills and precisely what they spend that taxpayers’ money on.

John Penrose: I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is a timeworn phrase but it bears repetition: sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is vital that the Government secure value for money. Given that the purpose of Short money is to provide a credible Opposition, does he agree that the display that we have seen so far, with the announcement of policies such as nuclear submarines without nuclear missiles, shows that much of it has been completely squandered?

John Penrose: I hesitate to follow my hon. Friend. Friend down such a path, but if the purpose of Short money is to provide a credible Opposition and it has gone up by 50% since 2010, perhaps we now have an incredible Opposition instead.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Since, with the one exception that we have just heard, there is such strong feeling among those on the Opposition Benches that the Government are intending to undermine the work of the Opposition, would it not be sensible to do what was done originally when Short money was introduced—namely, to have constructive talks with the Opposition, with no ultimatum at the outset, in order to reach a fair settlement?

John Penrose: I had rather hoped that the request for views would elicit a strong and perhaps constructive response. I am afraid that has not been visible so far, but none the less I hope that that may change between now and the end of the period of the request for views. I also point out to the hon. Gentleman that because we are facing a deficit, time is pressing and we have less fiscal slack to play with.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Short money reforms mean that Labour has to name and state the salaries of its special advisers, particularly those who write the Leader of the Opposition’s speeches, because although I do not know their remuneration, I think they are hugely overpaid?

John Penrose: Given the level of transparency that is already rightly expected of the Government when employing Spads, for example, it is reasonable to ask for an equivalent level of transparency with regard to how Short money is spent on people such as Damian McBride, who I understand has just rejoined the Labour party’s payroll, and Seumas Milne.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Minister talks a lot about savings to the taxpayer, but can he confirm that any savings that will be made by these proposals will in fact be dwarfed by the extra cost to the public purse as a result of the Prime Minister’s prolific rate of appointments to the other place?

John Penrose: Actually, the cost of the House of Lords, I am told, is falling even while its numbers are rising, and so the cost to the public purse will be reduced as a result of the changes that are happening at the other end of the building.

On the hon. Gentleman’s broader point about whether saving this amount of money is worth while, I would say, at the risk of angering my colleagues from Scotland, that mony a mickle mak’s a muckle. It matters what we save and it matters that we pay attention to every single detail, given the scale of the deficit that we inherited from the previous Labour Government.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I hope the Minister will recognise that there appears to be consensus in the House on transparency. Would it be fair enough, given that the Government have reduced their travel costs during their time in office, that the Opposition should publicise their travel costs and claims for special advisers running up and down the country?

John Penrose: That is an intriguing proposal, and I thank my hon. Friend very much for it. I will take it as a constructive suggestion for the request for views.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Given the increase in costs of Spads since 2009 by some 56%, the proposed cut in Short money of 24% over four years is disgraceful. Is the Minister not ashamed of his Government’s attack on democracy and scrutiny in this House?

John Penrose: We have already covered these points. Short money has already gone up by 50%, and it has gone up by 30% in the past year. I think that people listening to these exchanges will be asking themselves how much it costs to run an Opposition and why politicians feel they are so much more deserving of cash than, for example, benefits claimants whose money has not risen at anything like the same speed.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Given the public’s perception of the performance of the Leader of the Opposition, perhaps we should just take the Opposition’s money away completely.

John Penrose: I will take that as a suggestion and a proposal. I suspect that the weight of views across the House may probably be rather against it and that people do feel that there is a place for Short money, if it is properly reformed, in the same way as there is a place for the policy development grant, in order to make sure that an effective Opposition, properly, not excessively, funded, can function.
Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Again, I ask this question: with the cost of Government Spads rising, will the Minister concede that a disgraceful 24% cut to the Opposition parties’ funds is a case of double standards and an impediment to the Opposition parties’ scrutiny of the Executive?

John Penrose: I am afraid that I respectfully disagree with the hon. Lady, if only because, as I said, the cost of Spads has fallen since the general election and will still remain lower than the total funding for Opposition parties.

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): Spending of Short money is unnecessarily opaque, so in his consultation, will my hon. Friend seek representations from senior, and numerate, Opposition Members such as the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) and the hon. Members for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) and for Islington North (Chris Evans) as to whether they think that the taxpayer, and indeed their own party, gets value for money from the likes of Seumas Milne?

John Penrose: I will take submissions from any Member on either side of the House on what would involve good value for money. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the questions of what represents value for money, how much it costs to run an Opposition office and whether we can make sure it is done as efficiently as possible with taxpayers’ cash.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The fact is that the number of special advisers has gone up to 96 and the Prime Minister has appointed a record 236 peers to the other place. Meanwhile, the Government have introduced the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 and are attempting to gag the trade unions and cut the Short money. That shows that the Government are not interested in cutting the cost of politics. It is absolutely clear that they want to silence any opposition in this country.

John Penrose: I am afraid that I do not accept the premise of the hon. Lady’s question. We are proposing to cut the number of MPs in this place—which is not an easy thing to do—so we are very serious about cutting the cost of politics. I therefore hope that, in that spirit, people will contribute constructively to the request for views.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Does the Minister agree that my constituents at least have the right to as much transparency as possible on how Short money is being spent? For all they know, it could be being used by hon. Members to help them write their books.

John Penrose: I am sure that none of the Opposition parties would spend taxpayers’ money in such a disrespectful fashion, but they will, of course, have nothing to hide, so I am sure that nobody will be at all concerned about proposals for increased transparency.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that this will have to be done by a resolution of the whole House? Does he have a date in mind for such a resolution?

John Penrose: The usual parliamentary process will be followed, so there will have to be a proposal. The statutory instrument for positive development grants has already been laid, and that can be either passed or prayed against in the usual way. The hon. Lady is right to say that, when we come up with proposals for Short money, they will have to be passed by a resolution of this House.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that during the consultation he will specifically look at protecting and supporting the interests of minority parties? They have a hugely important role to play in this Parliament, especially when we have such a divided and weak official Opposition.

John Penrose: I gave in my initial remarks an illustration of some of the peculiarities of the distribution of Short money. I gave comparisons between the money received by UKIP and the Greens, but there are other examples. Many Members of smaller Opposition parties will be able to quote examples of why they feel they are being either under or over-remunerated, depending on who they are. Therefore, it is certainly sensible for us to ask how that can be improved and whether the basis of allocation can be made better.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): “Cutting the cost of politics,” the Minister says, meaning cutting the number of elected MPs while stuffing the other place full of his mates, and cutting support to Opposition parties while greatly increasing the number of Government special advisers. If he wants to cut the cost of politics, why has the Conservative party claimed £1.27 million in policy develop grants since 2010?

John Penrose: The allocations of money as per policy development grants are based on recommendations by the independent Electoral Commission, not on Government proposals. I would also point out that we are practicing what we preach, because in previous years the allocation of policy development grants to the Conservative party has been scaled back. We have handed some of that money back, for precisely the reasons that I described earlier about wanting to cut the cost of politics.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): With a national debt of £1.5 trillion, or £24,000 for every man, woman and child in this country, and some Government Departments making heroic efforts to cut back-office functions—the Ministry of Justice is cutting 50% of its back-office functions—what possible signal does it send out to the country and to the civil servants doing those jobs when they see some political parties refusing even to engage with sensible reforms of their own funding?

John Penrose: I could not agree more. The general public will not understand why politicians feel that we should be a special case. They will look at and listen to this debate and ask, “Why should these guys think they
are in any way deserving of better treatment than people who are on benefits and struggling with their budget? Why should they get a special deal?"

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I do not think that the general public will understand why the Cabinet Office has 50 press and communications officers or why the Ministry of Justice has 42 external communication officers. Should not the Government start to tighten their own belt and cut their own cloth first?

John Penrose: The Government are putting their own house in order. We made dramatic savings in the public sector over the course of the last Parliament and we are continuing to make further savings, including of 19% in unprotected Departments, across the whole of Government in this Parliament, so I respectfully reject the hon. Lady’s starting assumption.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): In the last Parliament, I was an adviser to the then shadow Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), along with one other part-time member of staff. By contrast, the Government Ministers had four special advisers, a series of private offices and hundreds of press officers and policy advisers. There is no equivalence. Will the Minister accept that Short money is not profligate, but the minimum required for opposition in a healthy parliamentary democracy?

John Penrose: If it is the minimum required for sensible opposition, perhaps the hon. Gentleman can explain why it is so much higher now than it was five years ago in real terms, and why it will be higher than it was in 2014-15. If the costs of running an Opposition are consistent—they may even be lower than they used to be—the current levels of Short money, having risen so far, must be over-budget and something where savings can be made.

Crossrail: Elizabeth Line

1.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement to the House.

I am delighted to announce that from December 2018 the Crossrail route will be known as the Elizabeth line and will be marked on the nation’s transport maps in royal purple.

Today Her Majesty took part in a naming ceremony at the line’s new Bond Street station, where she met just some of those responsible for delivering Europe’s most complicated engineering project, which is now more than 70% complete and running on budget and on time.

Her Majesty has served our country for more than 60 years. She has been a symbol of wisdom, continuity and stability in an age of unprecedented change, and she has long been associated with many aspects of this nation’s transport. Our Queen opened the Victoria line service in 1969. The Fleet line was renamed the Jubilee line in honour of her first 25 years on the throne in 1979, and she is the first reigning monarch to travel on the London underground. More recently, Her Majesty opened the redeveloped Reading and Birmingham New Street stations and Heathrow airport’s new terminal 2 building. I am told that trains are Her Majesty’s favourite form of travel and that she is a frequent user of both the royal train and scheduled train services. I hope that Her Majesty will consider an invitation to travel on the first passenger train that will pass through the Elizabeth line’s tunnels in December 2018.

Even before that date, the project is breaking new ground. It is not just the largest infrastructure project in Europe, but the most technically challenging and the most ambitious. In a little over three years, the thousands of people who have worked night and day on the project have dug 26 miles of tunnels under London. Thanks to their work, the line is now more than 70% complete.

Last May, Transport for London began operating the first section of what will become the Elizabeth line route from Liverpool Street to Shenfield. Network Rail has completed most of the work to connect the line to the existing rail network. In Derby, as I have seen for myself, Bombardier is building the first carriage of the first Crossrail train—a British-built train for a Great British rail line.

When the Elizabeth line opens fully in December 2018, it will change dramatically the way in which people travel around London and the south-east. It will bring an extra 1.5 million people within a 45-minute commuting distance of London’s key business areas. It will increase the total railway capacity by 10% in the south-east, adding much needed capacity to some very crowded lines. It will support our ambition of city-wide regeneration and shorter journey times for passengers. I am pleased to confirm that all 40 Elizabeth line stations will be step free so that they are accessible to all.

We are proud of this investment, but it is not just about the current project work. The project will bring a lasting skills legacy to Britain—in particular, a skills legacy that will benefit many thousands of women. As Terry Morgan, the project’s chairman, has said, Crossrail
has always been more than a transport project. It has been a blueprint for how infrastructure should be built in future.

Today’s construction sites are sophisticated places, which require communication skills, the ability to multitask and manage complex projects, work in teams and win the trust of clients and site neighbours. Those are all skills that make such projects natural places for women to work. Through the building of Crossrail, they are steadily becoming a hallmark of modern construction. As a result, the project has broken new ground in the diversity of its workforce. Women make up almost a quarter of those in its graduate programme. Those are people who will go on to become the future leaders of the industry. Of the 10,000 people working on Crossrail, nearly one third are women. Through Crossrail, women are forging careers they never thought possible—a fact that we celebrated at a cross-party reception here in January that we called “She’s Building It”.

Crossrail—soon to be the Elizabeth line—the Olympics, Heathrow terminal 5, and Reading and Birmingham New Street stations are rejuvenating the image and the economics of British engineering and opening career opportunities to our best and brightest, among them increasing numbers of women. I know that people working on the Crossrail project are already immensely proud of the legacy that they are helping to create. I believe that their pride can only be enhanced by the announcement that this amazing, groundbreaking engineering project will forever be known by the name of our sovereign, Queen Elizabeth. With permission, I commend this statement to the House.

2.2 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of her statement. On my behalf and that of Her Majesty’s Opposition, I am in the happy position of being able very much to welcome the announcement. Crossrail has had cross-party support over its lengthy gestation period, and we all look forward to the considerable benefits that the new line will bring in the years ahead.

The naming of the line as the Elizabeth line is very much welcomed by Opposition Members. We have become used to the title Crossrail in recent decades. The renaming is a significant improvement on Cross London Rail Links Ltd, and Elizabeth is undoubtedly a much more elegant and fitting title for such an innovative and important transport infrastructure development, which will bring the benefit of better transport to millions of passengers from Reading in the west to Shenfield in the east. Given the enormous public commitment that has gone into developing the Crossrail brand, will the Minister give us an assurance that the Crossrail brand and livery will continue to be used?

I pay tribute to the last Labour Government, who took the Crossrail project forward in their 10-year transport plan, “Transport 2010”, in which they reasserted that an east-west rail link should go ahead. Alistair Darling, the then Secretary of State for Transport, announced that the Labour Government supported the new east-west Crossrail link and committed to bringing forward legislation to enable Crossrail to proceed, which was critical in turning the aspiration and ambition of Crossrail into reality.

One of the first ideas of the previous coalition Government, after they came into power in 2010, was to consider cancelling the Crossrail project altogether. Labour Members are delighted that not only is the project back on track, so to speak, but the Government’s conversion to supporting Crossrail has been so all-embracing that they have not only given the project their full backing but decided to dedicate it to Her Majesty. In that, they have our support.

We all expect Crossrail or the Elizabeth line to change the face of transport in London and the south-east, whatever its name. I would like to draw the Minister’s focus to a few points. Crossrail is largely on time and on budget, so can the Minister confirm that it will indeed open on schedule? Will she inform the House of what lessons have been learned from the successes of Crossrail that can be applied to High Speed 2? The Crossrail service will share the Great Western main line to Reading, but sadly the electrification programme has slipped and will cost more than was first estimated. Will the Minister take the opportunity to confirm to the House that the rescheduled electrification of the Great Western main line to Reading will be completed in time for the opening of the Elizabeth line?

I was delighted by the fact that after some 35 years of planning and development, Crossrail finally broke ground on 15 May 2009, when the Mayor of London and the then Transport Secretary, the noble Lord Adonis, sank the first pile into the docklands at the new Canary Wharf station. As we approach the conclusion of this most magnificent engineering undertaking, we remember the name of Crossrail with much affection and admiration. Although Crossrail is not dead, I wish the Elizabeth line a long and successful life.

Claire Perry: It is a delight to share, as we often do, a cross-party view—total agreement—on transport infrastructure. I would like to answer some of the hon. Gentleman’s questions.

Crossrail branding will apply for now, but the intention is that from December 2018 the Elizabeth line branding will come into force. The trains are currently under construction, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and it is not expensive to repaint and rebrand them, so I do not think that there are any costs associated with this welcome decision.

The hon. Gentleman asked about lessons that have been learned from Crossrail and that can be applied to Network Rail. I would argue that there are lessons that can be applied more broadly. One thing that has worked well is the fact that the project has stuck to its guns—stuck to its knitting. It has resisted demands for deviations from the route and proceeded with its original plan, which it has delivered very effectively. Crucially, it has blazed a trail in engagement with communities who are affected by the work. I have been surprised, when I have visited stations, by how little the people around the stations realise that the work is going on. That is a tribute to the care and consideration behind that engagement. Another enormously important factor has been the engagement of the supply chain. The majority of supply contracts are let to companies outside the south-east and, in many cases, to small and medium-sized enterprises. Those are two important lessons for the future.
The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about bringing the project in on time and on budget. I emphasise that that is part of the project’s careful planning.

On the question about the vital link between the Crossrail line and the Great Western main line to the west, I am happy to confirm that that work is on time and on budget, and it will absolutely be in place to ensure that the line runs. It is an enormous priority for all of us to ensure that the first trains can run from December 2018.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I strongly welcome the Minister’s statement. Can she guarantee that in the final 30% of the construction process we will be trumpeting the use of British steel wherever possible?

Claire Perry: I am happy to confirm that that is absolutely the case. Indeed, 85% of the supply chain providing steel to the project is UK-based, and the 57 km of rails that run through the central tunnel are 100% provided by UK steel suppliers. I am sure that my hon. Friend will also welcome the fact that 61% of the firms that have won work associated with the project are based outside London.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I, too, thank the Minister for providing an advance copy of her statement. I will come to the name of the line in a moment, but may I first welcome the increased opportunities that the project has provided for women? More needs to be done to get the message out to women and young girls about the opportunities that are available for them. I also welcome the accessibility aspect, which is an important factor.

A change of name can be invigorating. In Scotland, we found that the change of name from the Scottish Executive to the Scottish Government provided a new sense of purpose, from which people were able to take confidence. In general, the change of name is a good move. The royal theme is continued in Scotland by the Queensferry crossing, the name of which was chosen by public vote. Will the Minister tell us about the mechanism for renaming Crossrail? The public have certainly embraced it with some vigour. The Minister described Crossrail as a great British rail line. On that basis, can she guarantee that all the ticket machines on the new Elizabeth line will be able to accept Scottish notes so that we can actually travel on it?

According to figures announced just last weekend, the Scottish Government are investing twice as much per person in transport as England is, and have spent more per head on improving infrastructure than all the other nations in the UK since the Scottish National party came to power in 2007. I am glad to see some ambition today. May we have more of it to make sure that the people of the nations of the UK are better connected?

Claire Perry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for a very important list of questions. He is absolutely right to focus, as we are, on the diversity opportunities that have opened up as a result of this project. People too often think of engineering skills, particularly on the railways, as involving joining the wheel-tappers and shunters club, but it is not like that. It is a high-tech world in which people are more likely to go to work with a laptop than with a spanner. As I say, it is a growing industry partly thanks to this Government’s record in transport infrastructure, so it is one to which we would like to attract more women. There have been some little but subtle changes. The so-called man cage that takes people down into the giant hole where the tunnels start has, at the suggestion of the very feisty woman in charge of the work at Farringdon station, been renamed a people basket. That is a brilliant example of how small changes can make a difference.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about the mechanism. Many people would like to claim credit for what is a very good idea, but I am sure if we put it to the British people in a referendum, they would—if they do not have referendum fatigue—overwhelmingly support this decision. Of course, the Queen did approve the decision. I think its genesis lies in the fact that she is now our longest-serving monarch—she has been on the throne for 64 years—and the name change is a very fitting tribute to the length of her reign.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Scottish pound notes. Based on my experience with London cabbies, I am very sorry to say that many people still do not believe they are legal tender south of the border. I will look into that matter and respond to him. Of course, I would like a revolution in ticket vending machines so that we can use mobile and smart ticketing much more often than cash when we purchase railway tickets.

The hon. Gentleman raised the importance of infrastructure north of the border. I am sure he is delighted, as I am, that the west coast main line—the vital passenger and freight route that crosses our borders—has been reopened two weeks early, after the devastation at Lamington viaduct. I went to see it in the snow, with his party’s Transport Minister from north of the border. It was a difficult site, and I am sure we all want to pay tribute to the orange army that delivered that result and got the line open.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this announcement, and the Minister is right to praise Crossrail—the Elizabeth line. Does she think it is a suitable model to follow for Rail North, and indeed for the new northern transport body that has just been set up, Transport for the North, so there can be investment in new lines right across the north of England to make the northern powerhouse a reality?

Claire Perry: I thank the hon. Lady for her support for the announcement. She is right to focus on such parallels. Clearly, transport money is best spent when it is pulled through to satisfy local demands and to drive local economic growth. I am sure she welcomes what the Government have done. We have set up Transport for the North on a stand-alone basis and we have funded it, and we have asked the devolved authority to work on plans and proposals to drive forward infrastructure investment in the region. In his comments, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) referred to the role of Lord Adonis. I pay tribute to him for generating this idea and pushing it through, often, as with many rail investments, in the face, frankly, of opposition—
Andy McDonald: No.

Claire Perry: Well, the hon. Gentleman corrects me, but I am delighted to say that this is now happening. Lord Adonis now heads the Government’s National Infrastructure Commission, which has been tasked with looking at—this idea again has cross-party support and consensus—how we can best spend the ongoing investment in infrastructure for the benefit of the British economy.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Crossrail is a complex project, as the Minister says, especially where there are interchanges with other lines. At Old Oak, it interchanges with overground, underground, Great Western and, of course, HS2 services. Will she look at the very poor co-ordination of that interchange, where every company is doing its own thing, with the Crossrail depot being built in the middle of prime development land? She might like Lord Adonis to look at that, as he knows what he is talking about.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the complexity of the project—some of the tunnels have been tunnelled to within 30 cm of existing infrastructure beneath the streets of London, which is an astonishing achievement—and of the interchanges, on which such decisions are often considered to be too complicated. The Government, TfL and Network Rail are working closely with the Old Oak and Park Royal Development Corporation—that is another example of a devolved authority—to make sure that it understands its aspirations for the publicly held land at Old Oak Common. It is a balancing act and it is difficult to get it right for the future, but we will continue to invest in this vital infrastructure and we will make it work for the benefit of the British economy and of rail passengers across the UK.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I agree wholeheartedly with what the rail Minister and the shadow rail Minister have said about Her Majesty and about our brilliant railway staff. I am a former Network Rail staff, and I worked with some fantastic women engineers. May I, however, offer the Minister some constructive criticism? Her statement made more references to services to Liverpool Street than to those to Liverpool. Now that Crossrail is moving towards completion, will she turn her attentions northwards, and will she say how that might be done?

Claire Perry: I talked more about Liverpool Street only because Crossrail does not of course go very far north at the moment. I have great respect for the hon. Lady, but she will know from her constituency that we have electric trains running between Manchester and Liverpool for the first time ever. That is tangible evidence that the Government are delivering both on infrastructure promises in the north and on rolling stock. I am sure that she, like me, has long thought the Pacer should have been phased out a long time ago, because it is not fit for purpose in moving people around such a vibrant and growing part of the country—the north—which I know she is proud to represent. This Government are taking such investment decisions. My door is always open to delegations from any part of the country that wants to talk about how railways can further transform their local economy.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): May I add my congratulations to the whole Crossrail team on this remarkable feat of engineering, which will bring enormous benefits to my constituents in Ilford? In particular, I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), who, as chair of the all-party group on Crossrail, has batted particularly strongly, if I may say so, for the longer-term benefits for the residents of Ilford.

This weekend, I will join residents of St Peter’s church at Aldborough Hatch in my constituency to “Clean for the Queen”. May I therefore, on behalf of so many of my constituents, commend those who have come up with this fantastic and fitting tribute to our longest-reigning monarch for her more than 60 years of dedicated public service?

Claire Perry: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support, and indeed for highlighting “Clean for the Queen”, which will have us all putting on our rubber gloves and getting out our litter pickers in the next few months. He raises the important point that this House is at its best when we come together to invest in major pieces of infrastructure that will transform the lives of those who will benefit directly, but also benefit those working for such a construction project or, indeed, supplying products for it.

An outbreak of cross-party consensus is just what we need, and we of course have such a project with HS2, which I believe completed its Select Committee stage only yesterday. Frankly, I pay tribute to the Committee, because it has been a labour of love—[Interruption.] I am not going to comment on that. Spades will be in the ground from 2017, and the skills that many hundreds of men and women have built up—we now lead the world in soft-ground tunnelling—will be very useful for the Thames tideway, the HS2 work that is coming and, indeed, with the A303 proposals that will benefit my constituency.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Could some of the efficiency that the Minister has spoken about with regard to Crossrail be applied to Southeastern, which has been providing an appalling service? Will she agree to meet a delegation of MPs from south-east London to discuss how that might be done?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman has long been a doughty campaigner for improved rail services for his constituents. I hope that he received a letter from me just a few weeks ago, which said that I hope to make a decision shortly about the long-awaited capacity increases, because I know that he is very concerned about the crowding on those trains. I hope to have good news on that very shortly, but, as he knows, my door is always open.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that if the hon. Gentleman received the Minister’s letter, his happiness would be as unalloyed as hers obviously is today. We are extremely grateful to her.
Points of Order

2.19 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There appears to be considerable confusion in the Government over which Department is responsible for making an application to the EU solidarity fund for assistance for flood-hit communities across the north of England.

This is what I have found out from vague answers to parliamentary questions. In December 2015, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office said that it was a Department for Communities and Local Government issue. In January, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills said that it was a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs issue. A week later, the Leader of the House agreed. In early February, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that she had not ruled out making an application, but a week later one of her civil servants wrote to me saying again that it was a DCLG matter.

Whoever is responsible, the deadline for an application is just days away. The Government’s confusion and subsequent failure to act will potentially deny our communities hundreds of millions of pounds of much needed help. Will you please encourage the Government to sort this out and get a Minister here to make a statement, so that we can hold them to account?

Mr Speaker: Certainly, it would help if there were clarity. The hon. Gentleman knows that it is not for the Chair to adjudicate between what one Department says and what is said by another, but it is very important that Members know which Department is responsible and from whom they can expect an authoritative answer. My request to those on the Treasury Bench, therefore, is to correct the record. Knowing the hon. Gentleman as I do, I feel sure that he will seek to sort this out and get a Minister here to make a statement, so that we can hold them to account.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It was devastating news for my constituents and the Northern Ireland economy last week that 1,080 jobs will be lost at Bombardier. Indeed, jobs will also be lost at Derby in mainland Great Britain. Is it in order to inquire of you whether Departments have made any approaches to come to this House so that we can not only raise the consequences of the decision, but seek an assurance from Her Majesty’s Government that there is support for innovation and aviation in our society?

Mr Speaker: I have received no approach thus far, as far as I am aware, from any member of the Government asking to make a statement on the matter. The hon. Gentleman may use the Order Paper to pursue his objective. Moreover, if he is so seized of the importance and, perhaps, the urgency of the matter that he wishes to debate it on the Floor of the Chamber, he will be aware of the opportunities that are provided by Adjournment debates. I have a hunch that he will seek to take advantage of those opportunities.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a two-headed point of order, if that is okay. The first refers to the exchanges that we had earlier with the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) on Short money. Will you confirm that it is indeed true that the accounting officer for Short money is the Clerk of the House, not the permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office? Has the Clerk of the House therefore been consulted about Short money? Why has the Vote Office—this is still the first head—still not been provided with copies of the consultation, when it pertains directly to the House of Commons?

Secondly, will you confirm, Mr Speaker, that there is a process for Ministers to correct the record when they have inadvertently made a mistake? The Cabinet Office Minister, to my reckoning, made about 18 factual errors. The biggest was when he said that no cut was planned, despite the fact that his document says:

“By contrast… A 19 per cent reduction will take Short money back”.

I do not know what the difference is between a reduction and a cut, but I am sure that there is a means of correcting the record. I wonder whether we can make a special exemption on the number of special advisers for the Minister, because he is making so many mistakes that might be corrected by proper research.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the shadow Leader of the House for his point of order. Let me answer his two inquiries. First, I can indeed confirm that in respect of Short money, the accounting officer is the Clerk of the House. On whether the Clerk has been consulted, I am not at all sure. The Clerk is well aware, as I am well aware, of the consideration of policy on this matter. Moreover, I have seen a copy of the consultation document. Beyond that, I would not go.

Secondly, there are any number of opportunities for a Minister, if he or she believes that the record needs to be corrected as a result of an inadvertent misstatement, to correct the record. Knowing the hon. Gentleman as I do, I feel sure that he will look to see the development of events. If he is dissatisfied, I have a hunch that his dissatisfaction will percolate through his contribution at the business question tomorrow.

Chris Bryant: Thursday.

Mr Speaker: Thursday, I beg your pardon. I am getting ahead of myself. It will be difficult, but we can just about wait for the hon. Gentleman’s contribution at the business question on Thursday. That is not to say that the matter will not be raised before then. I hope that that is helpful for now.
Air Quality (Diesel Emissions in Urban Centres)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.25 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move.

That leave be given to bring in a bill to make provision about urban air quality targets; to require vehicle emissions targets and testing to reflect on-road driving conditions; to provide powers for local authorities to establish low diesel emissions zones and pedestrian-only areas; to restrict the use of roads in urban centres by diesel vehicles; to make provision about the promotion of the development of electric tram systems and buses and taxis powered by liquefied petroleum gas in urban centres; and for connected purposes.

The invisible hand of diesel fumes is prematurely killing some 1,000 people per week in the UK. The Bill is designed to put the death-by-diesel epidemic into reverse, saving thousands of lives and billions of pounds. Today, the Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health have published a joint report that shows that there is now killing by diesel on an industrial scale, with some 40,000 premature deaths each year. The Bill is supported by those organisations, the British Lung Foundation and the British Heart Foundation because, as is becoming increasingly apparent to all of us, air pollution is killing people through lung cancer, through lung diseases such as bronchitis and asthma, and through strokes, heart attacks and heart disease. It is also linked to diabetes, obesity and dementia. It is a public health disaster. In the UK, it is causing the loss of some 6 million working days a year and costing our economy £20 billion a year. In Europe, it is costing the economy €240 billion a year and killing 380,000 people.

Diesel particulates that are absorbed by pregnant women can harm and hurt the foetus, causing low birth weight, organ damage, premature birth and stillbirth. Children who live in urban and highly polluted areas suffer from reduced lung capacity of about 10% on average and lower lung function in later life. Diesel particulates cause, rather than just exacerbate, asthma because they cause an allergic reaction and cell mutation in the lungs. In children, they cause coughs, wheezes, asthma attacks, worse concentration, worse memory and worse physical and mental development. Children are nearer the ground, so they suffer more. The first duty of mothers and fathers is to protect their children, but they are unable to protect them from this awful, poisonous belching.

In 1952, 12,000 people died in the London smog. Today, similar numbers are dying every year owing to the invisible fumes that are being emitted on an industrial scale by diesel-powered vehicles. Instead of coal fires, the new killer is diesel. The volume of traffic has grown tenfold in the last 60 years. Much has been done to stop the emission of carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, sulphur and lead, despite the protestations of the motor manufacturers that it was impossible. Nitrogen dioxide and particulates now offer a new catastrophic threat to human life and life expectancy, and that threat has grown exponentially. In the 1980s, diesel cars made up only 10% of new cars, but by 2000 it was 14%. Between 2000 and now, that figure has grown from 14% to 50% of new cars that are pumping out diesel particulates and nitrogen dioxide.

The Government want to reduce carbon dioxide, and motor manufacturers took that as a pretext to encourage diesel instead of trams, hydrogen or green transport. In a similar way, after World War Two, motoring manufacturers pulled all the trams out of our city centres for their own commercial interests. Now, the contribution of diesel to climate change is no better—indeed, it is arguably worse—than that of petrol, and we are passively smoking diesel emissions that are costing £20 billion and 40,000 lives.

Taxation levels on diesel and petrol are on a par and do not reflect the cost to the environment and to health. Laboratory testing across the EU systematically understates the amount of emissions in the air that we breathe, and road emissions contain levels of carbon dioxide that are two thirds higher than in lab tests. For nitrogen dioxide they are four or five times higher.

Things are made a lot worse by the revelation that Volkswagen was caught black-handed cheating emissions testing, and the difference between using a defeat device in a laboratory test and out in the field is twenty-fold—20 times the emissions are belching into children's lungs from Volkswagen cars that are out on the road compared with those in the laboratory. Clearly, we need to sort that out. We have had the malignant growth of diesel pollution, and the mushrooming cost to public health. We have had the disaster of the industry saying that it will self-regulate but doing the opposite, and the first duty of a Government and a Parliament is to protect our children, the nation and the people of Britain.

The Bill will ensure that vehicle emissions testing in 2017 reflects on-road driving conditions such as accelerating, decelerating and standing still, and it will detect cheating devices such as those used by Volkswagen. The Bill extends low diesel emissions zones and pedestrianisation, and it restricts diesel vehicles that fail the Euro 5 emissions standards from polluted urban areas—those are the oldest and most polluting diesel cars, some of which have a worse pollution impact than lorries. It encourages the development of green public transport, including tram systems such as the one I pioneered in Croydon when I was leader of the council. It encourages liquefied petroleum gas, hydrogen-powered or electric-powered buses and taxis, and that in turn encourages walking and cycling because there will be cleaner air and less congestion.

We also need pollution warnings as we do with flood warnings—perhaps the Environment Agency should be given that responsibility because the Met Office has been told to shut up since the last time it gave a pollution warning in April 2014. The public have a right to know when they are at risk so that they can stay indoors, or roads can be closed because of excessive pollution. I hope that the House will support the Bill, and that the Chancellor will take the opportunity of the Budget on 16 March to support green transport and ensure that the polluter pays principle is carried through to taxation. We must signal to consumers who have bought diesel cars in good faith for the future, and ensure that the polluter pays principle is carried through to taxation. We must signal to consumers who have bought diesel cars in good faith for the future, and ensure that measures are transmitted into behaviour, as with previous signals. We need the right signals so that we satisfy our fundamental ambition and duty to protect the lives of our citizens, and ensure that the air that we breathe in our cities is clean and that the lives we lead are sustainable.
Question put and agreed to.
Ordered,
That Geraint Davies, Peter Aldous, Dr Sarah Wollaston, Andrew Gwynne, Stewart McDonald, John Mc Nally, Jonathan Edwards, Alison Thewliss, Chris Stephens, Rob Marris, Ann Clwyd, and Ms Margaret Ritchie. Geraint Davies accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 March, and to be printed (Bill 138).

WELFARE REFORM AND WORK BILL
(PROGRAMME) (NO. 4)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Welfare Reform and Work Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 20 July 2015 (Welfare Reform and Work Bill (Programme)), 13 October 2015 (Welfare Reform and Work Bill (Programme) (No.2)) and 27 October 2015 (Welfare Reform and Work Bill (Programme) (No.3)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement at today's sitting.

(2) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order: Nos. 1, 8, 9, 2 to 7 and 10 to 57.

Subsequent stages

(3) Any further message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) The proceedings on any further message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

Question agreed to.

Welfare Reform and Work Bill
Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I must draw the House’s attention to the fact that financial privilege is involved in Lords amendments 2 to 6, 8, 9 and 11. If the House agrees to any of these amendments, I shall ensure that the appropriate entry is made in the Journal.

Before Clause 4

2.36 pm

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Lords amendment 8, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 9, and Government motion to disagree.

Priti Patel: The Bill is a vital part of the Government’s reforms that are moving this country to a high wage, low tax, low welfare economy. It is fundamental to our commitment to end child poverty and improve children’s life chances, and to ensure that work always pays more than a life on benefits and that support is focused on the most vulnerable.

As is right and proper, the Bill’s provisions have been carefully scrutinised by both this House and the other place. Where appropriate the Government have tabled amendments to bring clarity or to remove unintended consequences, and they have made important commitments on supported housing and the social rents measure, on kinship carers and sibling adoptions under clauses 11 and 12, and on guardian’s allowance and carer’s allowance in relation to the benefit cap. The Government remain firmly committed to the aims and principles of the Bill as it left this House, and for that reason we wish to resist the non-Government Lords amendments.

Before I address each area in detail, allow me to set out the key principles that underpin our disagreement with the Lords. Our view is that the addition of child poverty income measures is unnecessary because we have already committed to publishing statistics on children in low-income families through the "Households below average income”—HBAI—publication. Lords amendment 1 would also reintroduce a failed approach to child poverty that is focused on tackling its symptoms rather than its root cause, and it would drive perverse behaviour focused on lifting people just above the poverty line, rather than on a life chances strategy that could transform children’s lives.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that income has a huge impact on life chances?

Priti Patel: Income is one of many factors that impact on life chances and poverty, which is why the Government are very much focused on tackling the root causes of child poverty. I will come on to discuss that issue even
It is crucial to make sure we have the right support in place to help people move closer to the labour market. As we all know, a large body of evidence shows that work is generally good for physical and mental wellbeing. There is also a growing awareness that long-term worklessness is harmful to both physical and mental health. Indeed, some of the major charities that the Department is working with agree that work can be right for some people after a diagnosis, and that improved employment support is crucial to helping people with health conditions and disabilities to move into work or get closer to the labour market.

As we speak, the Government are working on a White Paper for this year, which will set out plans to improve support for people with such conditions, including the role of employers and improved integration between health and employment. I will expand on that later, but I will begin by addressing Lords amendment 1 in detail.

Lords amendment 1 is wholly unnecessary, as statistics on low income are already published in the HBAI report. That information is available for all to see, and it will continue to be so. [Interruption.] Lords amendment 12. Labour Members are chuntering away. They will get their chance to speak shortly. I think they should show me the courtesy of allowing me to make my points. Ministers in both Houses have committed to the continued publication of the information contained in HBAI. I hope it is clear to hon. Members that more than adequate safeguards are already in place to secure the continued publication of low income data.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Macmillan Cancer Support has warned that cancer patients could be at risk of losing their homes if proposed Government cuts to ESA go ahead. Does the Minister have anything to say to Macmillan?

Priti Patel: What I would say is that Macmillan has also said that many people diagnosed with cancer would prefer to remain in real work or return to their job during or after treatment. It is important that the House recognises—[Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) would like to intervene he is very welcome to do so, but I think he should let me finish my point before he starts chuntering away. It is essential that people suffering with cancer get the right support. Obviously, when people are in the ESA support group and are unable to work, they will remain in the support group and be supported financially.

If I may come back to the point on Lords amendment 1—

2.45 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): rose—

Priti Patel: Is this on Lords amendment 1?

Owen Smith: It’s about Macmillan.

Priti Patel: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Owen Smith: I am grateful to the Minister. She prays in aid Macmillan. Will she confirm that it is opposed to the £30 a week reduction for members of the ESA work-related activity group? It is not in favour of it; it is opposed to it.
Priti Patel: I think Macmillan, alongside the Government, recognises that those on the support group will, rightly, not be affected. They will be supported, because they are in the support group and therefore obviously ill.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Priti Patel: No, I will not give way. I am speaking to Lords amendment 1.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Priti Patel: I am going to make some progress on Lords amendment 1, and then I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

I turn to why statutory income measures failed. They are flawed as they do not drive the right action to transform children’s lives. It is worth demonstrating that with a few examples. The Government are undertaking crucial reforms to improve people’s life chances, such as introducing the national living wage and increasing the personal allowance for the hardest-pressed families. Those policies will provide support for the hard-working families who need it the most, yet, according to Labour’s failed approach to measuring child poverty, their introduction would have supposedly led to an increase in child poverty. That failed approach incentivised the wrong actions. For example, it led the previous Labour Government to tackle the symptoms of poverty through expensive income transfers, such as spending more than £300 billion on working-age welfare and tax credits between 2003-04 and 2008-09, with very little return. The strategy failed to tackle the root causes of child poverty and did not make a long-term difference to children’s prospects.

Several hon. Members rose—

Priti Patel: I will give way shortly.

The number of children in relative poverty remained broadly unchanged. In short, there are fundamental weaknesses in that system, which the Government are seeking to put right through our life chances measures.

Andrew Gwynne: The Minister would perhaps want me to remind her that child poverty fell by 1 million under the Labour Government, which is something we should be proud of. Her own advisers advised against removing the child poverty indicators, so why is she headstrong in ignoring the advice not just of the other place but her own commission, which has said that this is wrong?

Priti Patel: We discussed this issue in Committee. I just reiterate that the Government are right in our approach: we are focused on tackling the root causes of poverty. Ultimately, as the Prime Minister said in his recent life chances speech, we are here to make sure we can tackle those long-term root causes. This is not just about measurement. The economy cannot be secure if we spend billions of pounds on picking up the pieces of social failure. Economic reform and social reform are not two separate agendas, they are connected to one another. Therefore, it is imperative that we focus our resources on how we can transform people’s lives, which is through tackling the root causes.

The path I urge the House to take is the one that will incentivise the right action, and the one that the evidence tells us will make the biggest difference to children’s life chances. That is precisely why the Government are seeking to introduce the life chances measures contained in the Bill. The statutory measures on worklessness and educational attainment, combined with the non-statutory measures in the forthcoming life chances strategy—such as family breakdown, problem debt, and drug and alcohol dependency—will drive the right actions to transform children’s lives.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Priti Patel: Just bear with me a second. [Hon. Members: “Ooh!”] There is no need to be childish. I will give way to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting).

Wes Streeting: I am grateful and surprised that the Minister has given way. I am sure the Prime Minister is delighted to see her back on message today, as she has not been in the past few days. She talks about the measures in the Bill. How can she go against the advice of her own Government’s commission when it says that “it is not credible to try to improve the life chances of the poor without acknowledging the most obvious symptom of poverty, lack of money.”?

When is she going to listen to the Government’s own advisers?

Priti Patel: Let me remind the hon. Gentleman that we continue to publish data on low-income households. This information is still being published—[Interruption.] It might not be the information that the hon. Gentleman wants to know about, but we are publishing it, alongside doing something that previous Labour Governments successively failed to do—transforming lives, addressing the root causes of poverty and, importantly, ensuring that we tackle the causes that have led to child poverty in the long run.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who made a point about child poverty but is no longer in his place, seemed to indicate that owing to the recession under the last Labour Government, child poverty fell. Does that not show the falsity of Labour arguments and reveal that we are trying to seek the root causes of poverty rather than provide some measure that simply does not work?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right. It is absolutely clear that when children are the future of our country, it is right to focus on delivering better life chances for them. When we publish the life chances strategy in spring, we will make the biggest difference to children’s life chances now and in the future. We must seek to rescue a generation from poverty by extending life chances right across our country. We must build a country where opportunity is more equal, with stronger communities and young people who can face the world with a background of experiences and characteristics that we know are vital for their success. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, we must seek to
“transform the life chances of the poorest in our country and offer every child who has had a difficult start the promise of a brighter future.”

Stephen Timms: Did the Minister see the report published by the Centre for Social Justice last month, which set out a way of combining the life chances indicators—interesting information will be provided in them—with income indicators, so that we do not ignore income, which is so clearly a key aspect of the whole issue?

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and his comment. We will publish the life chances strategy in the spring, and I think it will give us every opportunity to consider holistically all the factors that can lead to better outcomes for children and families. I recognise the right hon. Gentleman’s point. On the back of the remarks I have made, I urge hon. Members to support the Government motion and reject Lords amendment 1.

Let me deal now with Lords amendments 8 and 9, which as you indicated, Mr Deputy Speaker, impinge on the financial privileges of the House. These amendments would simply delete clauses 13 and 14 from the Bill. This would reverse the plan, announced in the summer Budget and endorsed by this House, to align the amount paid to ESA claimants in the work-related activity group to that which is paid to JSA claimants, and to align the amount paid to universal credit limited-capability-for-work claimants to that of the UC basic rate. Let me take this opportunity to stress the Government’s strong belief that this reform is the right thing to do. It is part of our efforts not just to improve people’s life chances but importantly to support them going into work so that they can reach their full potential. Let me explain why.

Record employment levels and strong jobs growth in recent years have benefited many, but those benefits have yet to reach those on ESA. While one in every five JSA claimant moves off benefit each month, this is true of just one in 100 ESA claimants in the work-related activity group. This Government believe that people with health conditions and disabilities deserve better and deserve more support. I appreciate that Labour Members have no solutions for tackling the wider issues surrounding welfare and would rather simply continue to spend public money in an unsustainable way. We have listened to charities and campaigning organisations who say that improved employment support is key to helping people with health conditions and disabilities to move closer to the labour market and, when they are ready, into work.

Neil Gray: I look forward to reading the Minister’s White Paper, but is she not approaching the matter the wrong way round? Should she not introduce the White Paper first and then look at making changes to ESA? What does she say to her colleague, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen)—I look forward to hearing her contribution later—who said on “ConservativeHome” this morning:

“The beauty of this intermediate WRAG group is that it is just that—intermediate, on the road to returning to work but not quite there yet.”

Priti Patel: I rather think the hon. Gentleman makes my point for me in the sense that those in the work-related activity group need more support. Currently, they have been getting too little support. That is exactly the purpose of our reforms. We believe that we must tackle this issue, and provide—yes—the right financial security for individuals, but at the same time also look at the most effective ways to improve the wellbeing of those individuals by giving them support to get back to work. Almost half a million people in the work-related activity group get too little support to move back into work. We currently disincentivise them from doing so. As I say, they deserve better than that, and the Government are determined to take the necessary steps to transform their life chances by supporting them into work.

The Government are committed to ensuring that disabled people are able to participate fully in society, and we have set out our ambition to halve the disability employment gap. It is a duty of Government to support those who want to work to do so, and most people with disabilities and health conditions, including the majority of ESA claimants, tell us that they want to work. Some 61% of those in the work-related activity group tell us that they want to work, and we mean to put those people’s ambitions at the centre of what we do.

Stephen Timms: We have established that Macmillan Cancer Support disagrees with the Minister on this issue. Parkinson’s UK, Mind, and Rethink Mental Illness, whose chief executive wrote to all of us, say that they strongly disagree. So can the Minister tell us the name of any organisation representing disabled people that agrees with the position that the Government have taken?

Priti Patel: What I would say to the right hon. Gentleman is that we have been working with organisations and disability groups, and we have actually been listening to them. Rather than making generalised comments from a sedentary position, Labour Members should realise that we are working with those organisations as we move forward with our White Paper—

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Priti Patel: No, I will not.

The ESA system was set up by Labour in 2008 to support people with health conditions and disabilities into work. Despite being set up with the best of intentions, it has failed the very people it was designed to help. The original estimates were that far more claimants would move into work. A White Paper was published in 2008, setting out that the then Labour Government aimed to reduce the number of people on incapacity benefits by 1 million by 2015.

We have spent £2.7 billion this year on the ESA work-related activity group, but as I mentioned earlier, only around 1% of people in this group actually move off the benefit every month. I think it is fair to say that this benefit is not working as anyone intended it to work and, most importantly, it is failing claimants badly. The Government are committed to spending taxpayers’ money responsibly in a way that improves individuals’ life chances, and helps to move people off benefits and into work.

Those in the work-related activity group are given additional cash payments, but very little employment support. As the Prime Minister has recently stated, this
fixation on welfare treats the symptoms, not the causes of poverty, and over time, it traps people into dependency. That is why we propose to recycle some of the money currently spent on cash payments, which are not actually achieving the desired effect of helping people move closer to the labour market, and put it into practical support that will make a genuine difference to people in these groups.

In addition to the practical support, which is part of a real-terms increase that was announced in the autumn statement, we need to reflect on how spending the £60 million to £100 million of support originally set out in the Budget will be influenced not only by Whitehall, but by a taskforce of representatives from disability charities, disabled people’s user-group organisations, employers, think-tanks, provider representatives and local authorities. So far, we have worked with charities including Scope, Leonard Cheshire Disability, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, the National Autistic Society and the Disability Action Alliance.

During the passage of the Bill, Members of this House and the other place raised concerns that we are expecting claimants who have been found “not fit for work” to be able to work. That is not the case. Claimants in the work-related activity group have been found to have “limited capability for work” and that is very different from being unfit for any work. Of course there may be limitations on the type and amount of work people in the work-related activity group can do, and they may also need workplace adjustments, but employment is not ruled out. That is the reason for the ESA permitted work rules. The distinction is important, because the misconception helps to drive people further away from the labour market, perpetuates the benefit trap, and undermines the life chances of claimants.

3 pm

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The Minister has mentioned fluctuating conditions. It is well known that mental health problems cause fluctuating conditions which are very hard to deal with, but 50% of the people affected by the cut in ESA have such problems. Surely that has not been built into the Government’s thinking. What analysis has the Minister made of the impact?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of work to people who have previously been locked out of employment opportunities. We have many schemes, but Disability Confident is a very good example of how we can work with employers to deliver sustained employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The Government are doing additional work on a wide-ranging employer strategy, working with employers specifically to establish how we can address the disability employment gap and how they can give people with disabilities more structured and sustained employment opportunities.

It is important to recognise that the changes in employment and support allowance and universal credit work together, and cannot be dealt with in isolation. We have invested a significant amount in universal credit to ensure that we keep people connected and engaged with the labour market from the outset of their claims. Unlike those claiming employment and support allowance, universal credit claimants with a health condition or disability are offered labour market support, when that is appropriate, at the very start of their claim. That helps them to remain closer to the labour market, even if they are not immediately able to return to work. It also provides them with employment support, advice or training to get back into work, which, in the long run, will help them to obtain jobs.

I stress that this change does not affect those in the ESA support group or the universal credit equivalent. It also does not affect the premiums that form part of income-related ESA. Moreover, existing ESA claimants will not be affected. There will be no cash losers, and the policy applies only to those who apply for ESA and subsequently enter the WRAG from April 2017. We also aim to protect those who move off ESA to try to work. Those who were receiving the component and returned to ESA within 12 weeks because they could not cope with work will be able to reclaim ESA and receive the component again. Hopefully, that will help to dispel the myth that everyone who is currently in the work-related activity group will be affected by the change. Universal credit works in a different way from ESA, but we aim to put similar protections in place.

This reform is a first and necessary step towards a wider reform package. In the autumn statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that the Government would publish a White Paper this year that would set out our plans to improve support for people with health conditions and disabilities to further reduce the disability employment gap and promote integration across health and employment. That will include exploring the roles of employers.

Clauses 13 and 14, together with the additional practical support announced in the Budget, will provide the right support and incentives to help people with limited
capability for work move closer to the labour market and, when ready, into work. In the light of those arguments, I hope that Members will feel able to support the Government.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I support Lords amendment 1, which deals with child poverty reporting obligations, and amendments 8 and 9, which relate to the proposed cuts in the employment and support allowance work-related activity component and the universal credit equivalent.

Lords amendment 1 places a reporting obligation on the Secretary of State, requiring an annual report on child poverty to be laid before the House. The amendment stipulates that the report must include information on the percentage of children living in poverty as originally described in the Child Poverty Act 2010, and based on household income and material deprivation.

The Bishop of Durham, who moved the amendment in the Lords, emphasised the importance of income to an understanding of child poverty and children’s wellbeing and life chances. He said that income measures would not supplant the Government’s other measures relating to worklessness and educational attainment. These measures will ensure that the income-based measures of child poverty, which have been collected in the UK and other developed countries for decades, will be retained, allowing year-by-year comparisons and holding the Government to account.

Various charities, including the Children’s Society, the Child Poverty Action Group, and Child Poverty, have called on the Government not to abandon the income-based measures of child poverty, as has the Equality and Human Rights Commission. In a letter published in The Times today, 177 child health academics have written in support of retention of those measures. Even UNICEF has urged the Government to retain the income-based measures that are used in the 35 OECD countries, and that allow inter-country comparisons.

As has already been mentioned, the Government’s own 2014 evidence review of the drivers of child poverty found that a lack of sufficient income from parental employment—not just worklessness—was the most important factor standing in the way of children being lifted out of poverty. Even the Minister, in a recent Westminster Hall Debate, acknowledged that “Income is a significant part of this issue, but there are many other causes as well.”—[Official Report, 26 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 72 WH.]

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission’s 2015 annual report found that 2.3 million children were living below what is currently defined as the child poverty line, and the Resolution Foundation has estimated that in 2016 alone a further 200,000 children, predominantly from working households, will fall into poverty. That is on top of the projections of the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the falls in child poverty at the beginning of the century risk being reversed. The 1% uprating of benefits by itself in 2013 was estimated to have pushed 200,000 more children into poverty.

Given the Bill and the four-year benefit freeze, it is entirely probable that the increase in child poverty will rise even more steeply. A recent inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on health in all policies into the impacts of the Bill on child poverty and health showed clearly that it could lead to an increase in the number of children facing the misery and hardship of poverty by as many as 1.5 million by 2020.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that there are one or two things that we cannot allow Ministers to get away with. Tax credit, for example, was introduced by a Labour Government because the Conservative Government had done nothing about child poverty in the 1990s. More importantly, the Government say they want to get people into work, but in actual fact people who do get into work get zero-hours contracts, and women cannot get child tax credits as the Government have cut that. So much for doing something about child poverty! In Coventry there are 18,000 people using food banks. The Government are doing nothing about child poverty.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes some very valid points and I am going to come on to some of them in a moment.

The implication of these measures in terms of the future health and wellbeing of children is stark. There is overwhelming evidence that child poverty has a direct causal impact on worsening children’s social, emotional and cognitive outcomes. One witness to the all-party inquiry said:

“As children’s lives unfold, the poor health associated with poverty limits their potential and development across a whole range of areas, leading to poor health and life chances in adulthood, which then has knock-on effects on future generations.”

There was unanimous agreement from those who provided evidence to the all-party inquiry that although there is a positive correlation between worklessness and educational attainment and poverty, they are not indicators or measures of poverty. Let me reiterate that two thirds of children in poverty are from working families.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. Does she agree with the Institute for Fiscal Studies and others who have said that the prognosis for child poverty over this decade under this Government is bleak, and that what we are seeing in amendment 1 is the Government trying to hide information about what is happening to child poverty, rather than trying to tackle the underlying causes that lead to it, and that that is disgraceful?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes a key point, and I will come on to some of the specifics shortly.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The hon. Lady talks about in-work poverty, but can she confirm that under the last Labour Government in-work poverty rose by 20%?

Debbie Abrahams: No.

So how does living in poverty affect children’s development? People—

Richard Graham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: May I just make these points? Then I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.
People on low incomes are often juggling to heat or eat, as we heard in this morning’s Westminster Hall debate on the bedroom tax. Being able to pay their rent is an increasing issue; 443,000 are currently affected. Having a secure, warm home with healthy, nutritious food are basic physiological needs. When these needs are not met, people’s health suffers both physically and mentally. This is particularly the case for children as they are developing. Being in work or well educated does not guarantee these essential needs; money does. Again, I make my key point: two thirds of children in poverty now are from working families.

The lack of evidence, to which my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) was alluding, is stark. Why was there no Government impact assessment of these proposals? We should look at the evidence from the United States, for example. It has been analysing the effects of its social security reforms, and that shows that programmes that focus specifically on parental employment failed; in fact, they had no effect or exacerbated children’s health issues. Conversely, programmes focused on supplementing the income of low-income families improved health.

Paul Scully: Indicators are exactly that; they are not things that can be tackled, whereas this Bill seeks to refocus the Government position on the underlying causes and symptoms. Does the hon. Lady agree that far from being hidden, the figures that she seeks to include in this Bill will still be reported in the households below average income report?

Debbie Abrahams: The point here is about making the Government accountable for their policies that may in turn be affecting those measures.

I know the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) wanted to intervene, too.

Richard Graham: The hon. Lady is very kind. Both her party and ours are committed to ending child poverty, so the starting point is the same. The difference, in a sense, is the value of the relative indicator. She knows that one of the difficulties with the relative indicator is that quite often it will apparently improve during times of recession, but go down in times of growth. How effective does she think that is, therefore? About £300 billion was spent on benefits between 2003 and 2008. How effective does she think that expenditure was?

3.15 pm

Debbie Abrahams: As a former public health academic, I will answer in the following way. We know the value of having indicators that we can compare over a long period; that is internationally recognised. They provide an opportunity for this Government and future Governments—and past Governments as well—to be monitored and to be held to account for their policies and the way in which they affect child poverty.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to remind those on the Government Benches that the Child Poverty Act 2010 had four measures: a relative poverty measure; an absolute poverty measure; a persistent poverty measure; and a material deprivation poverty measure? We were not relying on one simple measure.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is spot-on, and again this is what the Lords amendment is asking for: that the exact same measures be included.

I want to sum up on this point by referring to one of the witnesses, who is a clinical expert in child health. He said the Government are trying to refocus child poverty from “income-based indicators” to factors related to “family breakdown, debt and addiction”, conflating “the consequences of child poverty, with the cause—a lack of material resources.”

That sums it up so well.

Let us turn now to the UK’s infant mortality rate, a proxy for the health of the nation. It is currently in the highest quarter of all EU15 countries. I was shocked when I heard that, and for under-fives we have the worst mortality rate in all of northern Europe. We should be ashamed of that. We know that infant mortality is strongly linked to poverty and material deprivation. We know from national statistics that there is a fivefold difference in the infant mortality rates between the lowest and highest socioeconomic groups. There is not a law of nature that says that children from poor families have to die at five times the rate of children from rich families.

Alison McGovern: My hon. Friend is giving a characteristically calm, evidence-based explanation of why money matters, so does she agree that it is disappointing continually to hear the myth from the Government Benches that educational attainment or poor health is what causes poverty, rather than poverty that causes those things?

Debbie Abrahams: Again, my hon. Friend sums it up perfectly.

Richard Graham: This is a serious question. If the hon. Lady is saying that the evidence shows that the mortality rate of poor children in this country is worse than in the whole of the rest of Europe and the benefits that we are giving are greater than those in the whole of the rest of Europe, something is not working. What does she think needs to be done to improve that?

Debbie Abrahams: Again, the hon. Gentleman possibly does not have all the evidence. On spending-to-GDP comparisons, we do not do particularly well. The Marmot review of health inequalities concluded:

“One quarter of all deaths under the age of one would potentially be avoided if all births had the same level of risk as those to women with the lowest level of deprivation.”

Again, we should recognise that we are talking about people living in our constituencies. Evidence to the all-party inquiry showed that eliminating UK child poverty would save the lives of 1,400 children under 15 every year. Furthermore, good early development is strongly associated with many positive outcomes in later life, including higher educational attainment and improved employment prospects in adulthood. As another
of the witnesses to the inquiry said, we are facing a child poverty crisis. Having made real progress in reducing child poverty in the UK, it is imperative that we continue to invest in our children, and protect and support the most vulnerable in our society. The introduction of the so-called “living wage”, the increase in personal tax allowances and more free childcare will not, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has clearly shown, offset the net loss to low-income households from tax and social security changes, including those in this Bill. I therefore urge Members from all parts of the House to support this amendment—our children’s futures depend on it.

Lords amendment 8 seeks to remove clause 13 and Lords amendment 9 seeks to remove clause 14. Clause 13 seeks to abolish the employment and support allowance work-related activity component for new claimants from April 2017 and replace it with universal credit. That would mean that social security support for people with a disability, impairment or serious health condition will reduce from £102.15 to £73.10, a cut of nearly £30 a week or £1,500 annually. The Government have argued that this is needed to “remove the financial incentives that could otherwise discourage claimants from taking steps back to work.”

The Lords rejected this on a number of grounds. First, people in the ESA work-related activity group have gone through the work capability assessment and been found not fit for work. This includes 5,000 people with progressive conditions such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson’s—conditions that will not improve. It also includes people with cancer. A survey conducted by Macmillan Cancer Support found that one in 10 cancer patients would struggle to pay their rent or mortgage if ESA were cut. The key issue is that these people are not fit for work, so suggesting that removing financial incentives will somehow make them fit for work is ridiculous.

Richard Graham rose—

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry but I have given the hon. Gentleman a number of opportunities to intervene. Secondly, there is overwhelming evidence of the extra costs faced by sick and disabled people, the associated poverty they experience as a result, and the clear implications for their condition. We know that 5.1 million out of the 12 million disabled people in this country live in poverty. We also know from the Extra Costs Commission that disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty, 80% of which is due to the extra costs they face because they are poorly—because they have a disability.

Lord Low of Dalston, Baroness Grey-Thompson and Baroness Meacher’s excellent report “Halving the Gap?” expressed real concerns that the Government’s assessment of the impacts of this cut on disabled people, including the potential increase in the number of disabled people living in poverty, was inadequate. They assessed that the cut in financial support would have an injurious impact on this vulnerable group. The Equality and Human Rights Commission agreed, with its analysis being that it “will cause unnecessary hardship and anxiety to people who have been independently found unfit for work.”

Thirdly, there is scepticism that there are employment opportunities for those sick or disabled people who may recover from their condition in the future. Approximately 1.3 million disabled people who are fit and able to work are currently unemployed, accounting for the disability employment gap of nearly 30% between disabled and non-disabled people. The Government have rightly said that we need to halve that, but they have been less open on how that can be achieved, and I agree with what the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) said about the disability White Paper. There is one specialist disability employment adviser to 600 disabled people trying to get into work.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Like me, she will see many of these people at her regular surgeries. It is clear to me from talking to them that the required support just is not there, and it is very expensive support that is needed. The Government talk a good game but do not deliver.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was about to move on to the support that is provided for disabled people through Access to Work. Last year, only 36,800 people received such support. Although I support the Disability Confident scheme, we must recognise that, across the country, there are only 112 active employers who support that initiative. How can we encourage and help disabled people who are fit to work into work when such limited measures are on offer? It is all topsy-turvy.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Does the hon. Lady agree that the incidence of disability and the incidence of lack of work opportunities do not go hand in hand, and the problem is not evenly distributed throughout the UK?

Debbie Abrahams: The hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point.

The suggestion that working four or five hours a week should recoup the loss of income with the introduction of the so-called living wage has been questioned by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The Disability Benefits Consortium, a coalition of more than 60 disability charities, has said that the proposed cut will push sick and disabled people further away from work and into poverty. It will not help, as the Government have claimed. A recent survey shows the concerns not only of disabled people—seven out of 10 of them think that their condition will deteriorate with the introduction of the ESA WRAG cut—but of the public as well. A Populus poll of 2,000 adults in January revealed that 71% think that cuts to social security will make the UK a worse place for disabled people.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): This Government spend £50 billion a year supporting people with disability and health conditions. That is more than France and Germany. If what the hon. Lady is saying is true, it is not just about money, is it?

Debbie Abrahams: Again, we need to look at our spend as a proportion of GDP. We are 19th out of 32—[Interruption.] No, France and Germany spend more. We spend 1.3% of GDP. We are 19th out of 32 EU countries. Contrary to what this Government perpetually claim about our generosity, we are not good at all in terms of the actual spend in relation to GDP. It was 1.6% of GDP in 1960. Now it is 1.3%. It is shameful. On those grounds, I ask all Members across the House to consult their consciences and support amendment 8.
Let me move now to clause 14. Again, the Government have been more than a little disingenuous when they suggest that the reduction in social security support applies only to new ESA WRAG claimants from 2017. From this April, 492,180 people currently on ESA WRAG will start to migrate across to universal credit, which, as many people know, combines a number of benefits, including ESA, into one amalgamated benefit.

Clause 14 removes the limited capability for work component for the work element of universal credit. That means that everyone currently on ESA WRAG will ultimately be transferred on to universal credit and will also have their support cut by £29.05 a week, or £1,500 a year.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a stark difference between the warm words of the Minister for Community and Social Care earlier on, when he talked about parity of esteem for mental health, and the proposals to penalise people with acute and chronic mental health problems?

Debbie Abrahams: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I absolutely agree with him.

What has been hidden so far is that this cut will also affect disabled people who are in low-paid work. Currently, 116,000 disabled people in low-paid work and working more than 16 hours a week receive the disabled workers element of working tax credit—about £60 a week—which they get as a result of being on disability living allowance or personal independence payments. They need that payment to cover the additional costs that they face as a result of work. Under universal credit, the limited capability for work component is the main additional financial support for disabled people in work and is meant to cover those extra costs. However, unlike the disability element of working tax credit, that is available only after working disabled people have been through a work capability assessment. If the Government go ahead and remove UC’s limited capability for work component from working disabled people, the inevitable impact will be disabled people dropping out of the labour market, thereby increasing, not reducing, the disability employment gap. It will have exactly the opposite effect to the one that the Government say that they want to achieve.

3.30 pm

It should be noted that for the 43,000 disabled parents on the disability element of working tax credit, withdrawal of the measure will mean that the family do not receive any extra financial support. The all-party report clearly shows the impact of the measures on child poverty. Children are living in poverty in 40% of families affected by disability. The inquiry found that that would become worse with cuts to ESA WRAG and the limited capability for work component. For those reasons, I urge everyone to support Lords amendment 9, which seeks to remove clause 14 from the Bill.

I have discussed the effects of the measures in the Bill. I have provided evidence for my arguments, as there has been absolutely no impact assessment. We have had to find the evidence to identify the implications of the measures because, to their shame, the Government have done absolutely nothing. I remind the House that the Bill has been introduced on top of many other measures, including the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which imposes £23.8 billion-worth of cuts on 3.7 million disabled people. The independent living fund has been closed, and there is the threat of a further cut of £1.2 billion. Cuts in social care affect disabled people.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am sorry; I am not going to take any more interventions.

Further cuts are bound to be made as the hasty consultation on the personal independent payment earlier this year is pushed through. The Government have tried to regenerate the economy on the back of the poor and disabled. Work does not protect against poverty, and the poor and disabled have been made to pay the price. This is about cuts to our social security system.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: No, I will not.

Instead of denigrating claimants in our social security system, we should recognise the important role that the system plays. Like the NHS, the social security system is based on principles of inclusion, support and security for all, assuring dignity and the basics of life for all, should any one of us become ill or disabled, or fall on hard times. Many hon. Members in all parts of the House believe that the Bill is a step too far, and I urge them to support Lords amendments 1, 8 and 9.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Everyone can see that a large number of hon. Members want to speak in the debate, which has to conclude at 5.36 pm. If Members can keep their speeches as brief as possible, we can get everyone in.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Everything comes to he who waits—and that was a long wait, everyone will agree. I will try to be brief, as I have seen how many Members want to speak.

I want to explain why, despite some misgivings about minor details, the Lords amendments are not just wrong but a retrograde step that would make matters worse. No one in the Chamber would disagree that it is a policy failure that only 1% of WRAG claimants exit the scheme to take up employment. We should not lock that into legislation, as that policy failure is unacceptable. I see constituents who have come to my surgery because they are marooned in a no man’s land. Some have been found to have limited capability for work in the work capability assessment, and some have exhausted all avenues of appeal, but for various reasons they do not feel comfortable with transitioning to jobseeker’s allowance, even though in theory they could receive greater support to re-enter employment if they did so. I endorse the disability charities saying that we need more disability advisers in Jobcentre Plus. That is one use to which we could put the extra £100 million that the Government talk about.

Graham Evans: Will my hon. Friend give way?
Paul Maynard: I am sorry, I want to make progress so that everyone can get in.

For many people, a response in mental health terms to a sudden onset of or change in a physical health condition makes their willingness or ability to engage in the employment market that much harder. The work capability assessment has consistently failed to adapt and accommodate those individuals. I recognise that a handful of individuals may be encouraged into employment by the changes announced today, but I believe the operation of the work capability assessment will follow the age-old pattern—every time it is changed, more and more people, almost by osmosis, end up in the support group. We have seen that year on year, time and again.

Without further policy change, we could be back here in a few years discussing a sub-group of the support group. But that is a key point: we will not be back here in a few years’ time with the same policy framework. The Government are being more radical in their approach. If this were the sole policy intervention that they were aiming to make, I would share many of the concerns being expressed, but that is certainly not the case. We have recognised that the status quo is inadequate, and the Government are committed to reforming the work capability assessment. A White Paper is coming forward that will, I hope, reform employment and support allowance, which is a dinosaur of a benefit. It is unfit for purpose. It is the last remaining disability benefit that still sees disability as a matter of physical health, rather than a matter of physical and mental health. For that alone it needs to be taken to the knacker’s yard and put out of its misery. I welcome the Government’s intention to do that.

If we agree to Lords amendments 8 and 9, we will not get a £100 million fund placed in the hands of the third sector to support people with limited capacity for work to try to get back into employment. That would be a wasted opportunity. We have managed to get 339,000 more people back into employment over the past two years. Everybody in all parts of the House knows the commitment of the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People to promoting the Disability Confident campaign. We all accept that the status quo is inadequate, and it would be the worst of all worlds to lock in a failed policy for the work-related activity group. That would benefit no one at all.

I shall briefly touch on Lords amendment 1. There is probably more consensus on how we view poverty-related issues than those on both sides of the issue would like to admit. I do not deny that levels of income have an impact on poverty levels in my constituency. Equally, I believe that there are more fundamental drivers of poverty in my constituency that also need to be addressed. As the exchange between the Minister and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) indicated, this is not the end of the policy journey. There is to be a White Paper on how we implement our life chances strategy. There will be an opportunity to look at how we integrate into the policy package the different indicators that the right hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) referred to, but Lords amendment 1 is fundamentally flawed. It shows a misunderstanding of how Government work. The Bill cannot place an obligation on the Government to pursue two broadly contradictory policy objectives for tackling poverty.

If we focus solely on the “poverty plus a pound” approach as the answer to the problems, and at the same time oblige the Government to look at life chances indicators, that will divide the Government’s attention and the Department’s ability to focus on what matters. Opposition Members may disagree with the life chances strategy, and they are perfectly at liberty to do so, but they cannot expect to ride both horses at once and hold the Government to account for it. The Minister has made it clear that the data will still be collected and published. The Opposition will be able to look at that information, assess it and hold us to account for it, but Lords amendment 1 seeks to ensure that the Government fail on both strategies. It would not allow us any latitude to pursue what we have an election mandate for—welfare reform. When we get the life chances strategy, I suspect it will be far more sophisticated than what has gone before.

It has always struck me as utterly perverse to suggest that the most effective and best way to reduce child poverty in this country is to somehow provoke a recession, because that will bring the income numbers down. Surely no one could say that that is the best indicator to utilise to drive change. It astounds me that the Opposition parties—for the sake of posturing, and because of what has happened in the other place—have decided that this is their chance to make a stand on the backs of the most disadvantaged once again, and to try to prevent the Government from doing something about this issue.

I am proud to support what the Minister is trying to do. We have had decades of failure on this issue under Governments of all persuasions. At last someone is trying to do something, but from the Opposition we have nothing but cant, rhetoric and opportunism.

Neil Gray: I am glad to have the opportunity once again to set out the SNP’s opposition to this dangerous and despicable Welfare Reform and Work Bill. The SNP will vote to make these Lords amendments part of the Bill, to protect children and disabled people from poverty. In October, my SNP colleagues and I tabled a series of amendments to the Bill, which were, sadly, not successful. Today, I call on right hon. and hon. Members across the House to take this final opportunity to stand up to the Government’s regressive and punitive social security cuts.

In my contribution, I will focus on the scrapping of child poverty reporting obligations, the ending of the ESA WRAG and the universal credit disabled workers element. My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) will also seek to contribute, focusing on the cut to the ESA WRAG, and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) will, I hope, discuss the report on child poverty and health by the all-party group on health in all policies.

Let me turn first to the overhaul of the Child Poverty Act 2010, which removes the income-related measures of child poverty, replacing them with an obligation to report on children’s life chances and scrapping the target to end child poverty by 2020. Scrapping that target, when child poverty is on the rise under this Government, is a disgraceful dereliction of responsibility, which serves only to highlight the lack of will on the part of Conservative Members to do anything to reverse the growing numbers of low-income families—in and out of work—who live in poverty.
Lords amendment 1, from the Bishop of Durham, Baroness Sherlock and the Earl of Listowel, would impose an additional reporting duty on the Secretary of State, requiring him to lay before the Houses of Parliament an annual report on child poverty. That report should include data on the percentage of children living in households on relative low income, combined low income with material deprivation, absolute low income and persistent low income.

The Bishop of Durham, in moving the amendment, stressed the importance of income in understanding child poverty and children’s wellbeing. He tackled criticisms made previously by Ministers by arguing that income measures would not displace other statutory measures relating to worklessness and educational attainment.

Speaking for the Opposition, Baroness Sherlock supported the amendment, noting that it would cost nothing and that it would allow the Government to be held to account on child poverty.

SNP Members find it unbelievable that the Government would wish to remove all links to income in reporting child poverty. Income is fundamental to whether someone is in or out of poverty—there is simply no getting away from that fact. We have no problem with the Government choosing to report on life chances, substance misuse, family break-up and unemployment by household, but they cannot get away from the fact that substance misuse, family break-up and unemployment are not unique to those in poverty—far from it. However, by using those alternative measures in isolation and not using any income-related measures, the Government are attempting to characterise poverty as a lifestyle choice, rather than looking at the structural causes of poverty.

Of course, such issues can impact on life chances, but income deprivation always will. An alcoholic single parent may be perfectly capable, for any number of reasons, of putting food on the table, a warm winter coat on their children’s backs or keeping their house warm. That may not be possible for a set of married parents who have no substance abuse problems but who are in low-income work. That has nothing to do with family breakup, substance abuse or unemployment—it is because of low income. So why on earth did the Government choose to ignore how many children do not have an outdoor space to play in safely or a place for the family to be able to celebrate a special occasion for them, or whether they can eat fresh fruit and vegetables every day? We know that 1.7 million children live in a family who want to heat their homes but cannot. The parents of 900,000 children want to put a warm winter coat on the backs of their bairns but cannot afford to do so. These are parents in and out of work, who are married or single. What is that if it is not poverty? We have to continue reporting on those matters.

3.45 pm

By removing the reporting obligations and targets on child poverty, the Government risk leaving themselves unresponsive to changes to child poverty rates over time, meaning that if the foci that are not in place and the aim of eradicating child poverty in the UK will be lost. Two thirds of children in poverty live in households where there is someone in work. The new measures proposed by this Government focus on worklessness, not in-work poverty. These fundamental changes mean that we will not know how those children are suffering, and there will be no accountability on this Government, or future Governments, to respond.

The Government’s own January 2014 evidence review of the drivers of child poverty found that a lack of sufficient income from parental income—not just worklessness but low income from work—is the most important factor standing in the way of children being lifted out of poverty. I quote directly from page 6 of the executive summary on factors now making it harder to exit poverty:

“The main factor is lack of sufficient income from parental employment, which restricts the amount of earnings a household has. This is not just about worklessness, but also working insufficient hours and/or low pay.”

The evidence is there in the Government’s own reports. Income is fundamental—the main factor in driving poverty—and therefore it must be a factor in measuring child poverty.

One of the most common questions I get asked when discussing my job in this place is whether Tory MPs realise the damage this Government are doing, and will do, to individuals, families and society in general with these welfare cuts: are they so out of touch that they are ignorant, or are they aware and just do not care? To be honest, I have struggled to answer that question from my constituents and others. The briefings that we all get sent from third sector organisations and other non-governmental organisations highlight what is at stake. I am sure that Conservative Members read them, as I do, so does their ideology simply blind them to the damage that is about to be done? This is children’s lives that we are talking about—children whose families have nothing. Of course we should measure that, of course we should want to tackle it, and of course we should set ourselves a target by which time we want it ended. Those who cannot see that—those who will vote with the Government later—should question whether their ideology is getting in the way of their moral compass.

I turn now to the Government’s desire to scrap ESA WRAG and the corresponding limited capability for the work element of universal credit, as contained in clauses 13 and 14, which Lords amendments 8 and 9 seek to remove. Several hon. Members, including me, were at the launch of the review “Halving The Gap?”, which the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) spoke about so eloquently, published by Lord Low of Dalston, Baroness Meacher, and Baroness Grey-Thompson, with support from Leonard Cheshire Disability, RNIB, Mind, the MS Society, the National Autistic Society, Mencap and Scope. The report, which was published on 8 December, found that there is no evidence that ESA WRAG acts as a financial disincentive to claimants moving towards work; claimants and organisations are concerned that those reliant on the benefit could be forced to work when many are too ill; the proposed reduction is likely to move those in this group further away from the labour market rather than closer; the removal of the £30 per week would reduce claimants’ ability to take practical steps towards work; the reduction in financial support is likely to negatively impact on claimants’ ability to look for work; and the reduction could discourage disabled people from moving into employment as they would risk receiving a lower
amount of benefit should they lose their job in the future. The review concluded with the recommendation that the Government
“halt its proposed change to ESA WRAG and instead focus on improving back to work support”
for disabled people
“by ensuring it is personalised, tailored and meets individuals’ needs.”

Lord Low, in particular, made some very pertinent points during the Lords’ consideration of these matters. He emphasised that a drop of £1,500 a year would take the income of ESA WRAG claimants from £5,300 to £3,800, which would exacerbate poverty among disabled people and be catastrophic for many who are in receipt of ESA WRAG. He said that
“the claim that disabled people are more likely to get a job if their benefit is cut just does not stand up.”

As he explained, the review found that the barriers that disabled people face in seeking employment are not any financial disincentives from ESA, but, rather,
“employer attitudes, their health condition, illness or impairment, difficulty with transport, and lack of qualifications, experience, confidence and job opportunities.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 27 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 1302.]

Lord Low welcomed the Government’s commitment to addressing the disability gap, but said that the proposed cut would hinder people’s ability to look for employment opportunities. He also raised the issue of the need for tailored personalised support for disabled people to return to work.

We must remember that before last year’s election the Prime Minister committed to not cut benefits to disabled people. The “Politics Home” website cites an interview the Prime Minister gave to “BBC Breakfast” on 31 March 2015 in which he said that his Government would protect disabled people from welfare cuts. This cut to ESA, affecting nearly 500,000 disabled recipients, makes an absolute mockery of that pre-election pledge. The cut will penalise sick and disabled people who are looking for work, will do nothing to help them into work and will push many into poverty.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Given that the Government have emphasised time and again the importance of evidence-based policies, is the hon. Gentleman struck by the fact that there is no evidence to suggest that a reduction of £30 a week would push people towards work and off unemployment?

Neil Gray: I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s contribution. In fact, the opposite appears to be the case. Those third sector organisations and disability groups with knowledge of this area say that the cut will actually hinder people’s ability to find work.

Baroness Grey-Thompson’s speech on 27 January highlighted perfectly the issues at stake, and I urge those Conservative Members who are struggling with their consciences to read it. She said:
“If this measure goes through, a disabled parent who is working and qualifies as having limited capability for work will, under universal credit—the flagship element of government policy—have no extra support in work compared with a non-disabled parent in otherwise the same circumstances. What will this mean for a disabled parent? Single disabled parents working 16 hours or more, living in rented accommodation and making a new claim for universal credit in 2017, will receive about £70 a week, or £3,500 a year, less than they would receive now on tax credits, despite the rise in the minimum wage…For hundreds of thousands of disabled people, keeping Clause 14 in the Bill will be devastating. It means that far from there being an incentive for disabled people to get into work, find work and contribute to society in the future, those with deteriorating conditions will be less likely to stay in work.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 27 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 1311.]

Paul Scully: On evidence, the hon. Gentleman suggested in an earlier intervention that WRAG was an intermediate group on the route back to work, but the fact that only one in 100 disabled people is finding work shows that it is a long-term group.

Neil Gray: What that shows is that the Government’s Work programme has been an absolute failure and that those who are on ESA WRAG take more time to get back into work and require extra support, so by cutting £30 a week this Government will cut their ability to find job opportunities, and that is shameful. I again urge Conservative Members to read Baroness Grey-Thompson’s 27 January speech in full before voting later.

In October 2015, the Disability Benefits Consortium found that seven out of 10 disabled people said that a cut in ESA would cause their health to suffer. Almost a third said that a cut to ESA would mean that they would return to work later. Shockingly, a third said that they could not afford to eat on the current amount they receive from ESA WRAG.

Scope is concerned that reducing financial support for disabled people on ESA WRAG will detrimentally impact on their financial wellbeing, placing them further from work, as disabled people have lower financial resilience than non-disabled people, with an average of £108,000 fewer savings and assets, and 49% of disabled people use credit cards or loans to pay for everyday items, including clothing and food. Mencap has said that households with a disabled person living in them will be hit much harder. A third of them already live below the poverty line, and the additional reduction in income will have a devastating impact on those who are in most need of Government support.

As the WCA does not assess employment support needs, the financial support that a disabled person receives also determines their employment support. Those two things are not related, and they mean that disabled people do not get the back-to-work support that they need, in answer to the point made by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). Evidence from disabled people’s organisations and official independent reviews have all highlighted the inaccuracies of the assessment, which means that disabled people do not get the right back-to-work support.

There is insufficient evidence, if there is any at all, for the Government’s assertion that reducing benefit support incentivises people to get back into work. The impact assessment contains no evidence whatever to show that reducing support to disabled people in the ESA WRAG will incentivise them into work. Reducing the financial support available through the WRAG will create a bigger distinction between the support received by jobseeker’s allowance claimants and those who are placed in the ESA support group. The IFS supported that argument by commenting that abolishing the WRAG component could strengthen the incentive for claimants
to try to get into the ESA support group. Ben Baumberg, of the University of Kent, agrees with that claim. He stated that the removal of the addition could lead to an increase in the proportion of claimants who are placed in the support group, because being placed in the WRAG could be a risk to their health.

The Minister said in her speech that she had worked with and listened to the likes of Scope and Macmillan, but they still oppose the cut, and she must say why she believes that to be the case. I was interested to read a story in The Guardian a few days ago, in which the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) and for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) were cited as possible members of a group of Tory MPs who are putting pressure on the Government on the matter. I am a less frequent reader of The Daily Telegraph, but I understand that they were also mentioned in that paper this morning. I read “ConservativeHome” even less frequently, but the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire wrote very well there this morning. [Interruption.] On this occasion, it was a brilliant article. She said:

“What has suddenly changed in the lives of these individuals that they are suddenly fit enough or not fit enough to work? The beauty of this intermediate WRAG group is that it is just that, intermediate. On the road to returning to work, but not quite there yet. Recovering from chemotherapy, but needing to keep the heating on that little bit more. Many people who are ill are desperate to work, but need to be supported financially until their health improves. There are also structural and economic barriers standing in their way; reducing financial support only serves to create a further hurdle to be overcome. Many of these people have worked and paid in for many years before falling ill. They deserve better than this.

The voters who trusted us”—

“to build a fairer society deserve better than this.”

I pay tribute to the hon. Lady and her colleagues who are thinking about supporting the Lords amendments. I desperately hope that those whom I have mentioned have been working on colleagues to join us in the Lobby later.

The issues at stake regarding ESA WRAG and universal credit work allowance are the very same issues as those with the cuts to tax credits, on which many Conservative Members honourably lobbied hard. The measure will impact on low-income families and on disabled people who are looking for work. The cut will, according to the organisations mentioned, including the Equality Trust and Citizens Advice Scotland, disincentivise people from going into work.

The Welfare Reform and Work Bill may well be the best example of doublespeak outside Orwell’s texts. The fact is that the Bill, as the Government would amend it, is unfit for work. The assessment of third sector associations, Opposition parties and the House of Lords is that the Lords amendments must remain. We have seen the Government forced through the courts into a welcome U-turn on the benefit cap for carers. They have also been told by the courts that the bedroom tax is discriminatory for disabled people. The UN is investigating the Government’s welfare cuts. Disabled people should not need the High Court to tell the Tories what is right and what is wrong.

This is our last opportunity to oppose the Government’s plan to stop measuring child poverty, and to oppose their shameful attempts to slash by £30 a week support for people who are unable to work because of ill health or disability—a proposal that is vindictive and woefully lacks the evidence base to support it. I hope that Members across the House will think carefully and consider the impact that their vote will have on the lives of people up and down these isles. Having considered that, there is only one course of action open to us today—to oppose the Government’s shameful proposals and support the Lords amendments.

4 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I rise to speak to Lords amendments 8 and 9. Reforming our welfare state was one of the greatest challenges facing the previous coalition Government and it continues to be one of the greatest challenges facing this Government. We are making phenomenal progress, with record levels of employment, and the Welfare Reform and Work Bill is unquestionably at the heart of this transformation.

Welfare needed to change. I saw the restrictions it placed on the aspirational potential of so many capable people. In my business, I had bright employees shackled to the state by the impenetrable barrier of the 16 hours of employment. I know some doubt the power of universal credit to transform lives, but as a member of the Work and Pensions Committee I have seen it operate. I am in absolutely no doubt that it marks the beginning of a new age, in which the individual and the state are partners in the future opportunities of the individual and their family.

Yet I feel an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu. Change needs to happen—but in a way for which those affected can prepare. We are debating whether we should cut the ESA WRAG allowance, which is typically provided to about 500,000 people recovering from significant illness as they transition from ill health to being fit to work. The Department for Work and Pensions talks about a White Paper that will set out its strategy of offering a different kind of support to help such people return to work, and some £100 million will apparently be made available by 2020-21. I listened intently to the Minister for reassurance about how that money will be spent. I acknowledge that she mentioned that a taskforce drawn from the Department and charities will be set up, but that should have happened before decisions were made to reduce financial support. I am uncomfortable about agreeing to the cuts until I know what the new world will look like for such people.

I do not believe mentoring and support alone will heat the home of someone recovering from chemotherapy or help the man with Parkinson’s who needs a little bit of extra help. I remain unconvinced that these people do not also have financial needs. The DWP states that many people stay stuck in the WRAG for too long—up to two years—but I would question its conclusion that they are financially incentivised to stay in that group. For me, the fact that they are stuck in that group says more about the failure of DWP processes than about claimants’ active choices. People in that group do not have an easy time of it. They must demonstrate an appetite to transition towards work, and they can be sanctioned if they do not do so. Anyone who has beaten
cancer must surely burst with the desire to return to a normal life and be unlikely to want to be labelled as a cancer sufferer for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

From 2017, about 270 disabled people in my constituency of South Cambridgeshire alone stand to lose £30, or 29¾% of their weekly income, if we accept the Bill in its original form and ignore the Lords. For them, I need to see more detail of the contents of the White Paper and to hear more about the financial support that will be made available before I can fully support the Government. If we do not get this right, we will damage not just the employment prospects and wellbeing of these vulnerable claimants, but our reputation and trust among the electorate. To secure my trust, I need to believe in the White Paper and that the £100 million will go some way to help those people. That is my warning shot to the Government. Today, I will not support them. I may abstain, but only for today. Let us get the detail right. Let us be a Government of sweeping strategic change, but let us also be one with the compassion and dexterity to look after the little man too.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): One of the big changes in this Parliament compared with previous ones is that when we debate welfare reform there are now too many speakers, whereas in previous Parliaments the Whips had the key job of pushing colleagues in to speak. I will try to speak briefly.

I am immensely pleased to follow the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) not only because of the role she plays in the House, but because of the particular role she plays on the Work and Pensions Committee, of which I am also a member. Like her, I will speak in favour of Lords amendments 8 and 9, but I question whether the Lords are right in amendment 1.

I do so not because I think in any way that it is not necessary for us to consider more regularly whether people who are out of work in our society have an adequate level of income. Most of us would find it near impossible to live on the scale rates, as they are cruelly called, that we give to people who are out of work. The fact that millions do so is a credit to their budgeting skills, which most of us do not possess. However, this debate is about more than what the minimum income is. It is about a strategy to prevent us forever and a day debating in the House the number of people who are poor in this country.

I do not know, but it may be that the report that the Prime Minister asked me to write, “The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults”, will play a small part in the Government’s strategy on life chances. I argued that although income is important, merely measuring income is inadequate if we are successfully to counter the extent of poverty in our country. We ought to look at the drivers of poverty.

As soon as I embarked on that analysis, I was struck by the information that was volunteered by the reception teachers I visited in different parts of the country. They could predict within a very short space of time—within the first half term of school—where children would end up. They could say quite confidently who would be head girl, who would find it easy to fly in this world, who would struggle and who would fail. That got me thinking about whether we needed to move beyond merely measuring income as the great driver of poverty and to look at life chances.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Does my right hon. Friend accept that all Lords amendment 1 does is to require that income-based measures of poverty be reported alongside and on a level footing with other life chances indicators? They would not be reported instead of, but in addition to, those other indicators.

Frank Field: The report that I issued made that very point. It said that we should continue to publish the poverty data and that, alongside them, we should have the life chances data.

Of course, there is much more to this debate than what is on the record. Historically, there has been a big divide between those who see money as the only agent to counter poverty—it clearly makes it easier for people if they have more money—and those who ask whether money actually transforms life chances in the way we wish. That is the question that I posed. Specifically, we wanted to know, while taking account of the importance of income and class in determining life chances, whether there were drivers of poverty more powerful even than income and class. The report lists the most powerful factors when income and class are held constant—those factors that enable us to make progress even if we are not making the progress that we would like to see on a fairer distribution of income.

Again, I make a plea to the House. Although we ought to debate the adequacy of the minimum levels of income, Opposition Members and the many Government Members who are disturbed by the growing and gross inequalities in our society must not think that we will deal with those through benefit changes, important though they are. Throughout the western world, there are clearly great engine drivers of inequality that serve up to the rich—particularly to the very, very rich—rewards that are grotesque when compared with the average, let alone with those who earn the least in our communities. There is no debate about that. The debate is about where, at any given point in time, we should put taxpayers’ money. Up to now, everybody has been talking about this as though the Government have money. Governments have to tax our constituents to get money to redistribute it, and we must win people’s support for that.

The House is beginning slowly to accept that it is dangerous to have a welfare system that is more generous to those out of work than to those in work, which is why I particularly welcome the Chancellor’s strategy of moving towards a living wage and implementing that over the life of the Parliament. It is only a beginning, but it is very important. If we are successful in moving to that living wage without big unemployment consequences—I believe that we will be—that will give us more freedom to manoeuvre on where benefit levels should be set.

My plea is that we should not think that this is either one thing or the other. The Government will publish the data, and I am sure that if we had a chat to them they could do so alongside the life chances data. That is not really what the debate is about; the debate is about those who believe that the only agent of change is on the income front, and I do not wish to concede ground to anyone in emphasising the importance of income, especially for those at the bottom of the pile who are working or who are not working. We have the report on the foundation years, and even if we are serious about trying to prevent poor children from becoming poor adults,
we need a different strategy from the one we adopted until that point. It was all about cash transfers—important as they are—and I thought it was inadequate.

Reception teachers said that by the time children come to school they already know who is going to succeed and who will not. I also started asking other people such as health visitors whether they could tell us which children entering toddlerhood would be successful in later life. Midwives have clear views when mothers turn up for their first scan about who has drawn the short straw and who has not. If we are serious about this strategy—I make this plea to the Government because we will need powers to add these measurements once we have agreed on them—we must measure whether we are increasing life chances by having more parents who are ready for the birth of their child, whether the interventions that we make after that will be successful and see more children successfully enter toddlerhood, and above all whether more children are entering school ready to benefit from the powers of education.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is measuring at key stage 4 when a young person is 16 so utterly after the horse has bolted that it will not make any impact? Teachers report a year’s difference in a child’s ability to communicate and learn by the time they are five, and we need to change that. No Opposition Members are talking about money or life chances; most of us are arguing for both.

Frank Field: The genuineness of the hon. Lady in making that point shows how the debate is changing—it was not always about that issue and I am grateful for her intervention. Let me re-emphasise her point. I was staggered when the Secretary of State said that one of children’s key life chances is at age 16, given that he has done more than anybody in the House to teach us about how crucial life chances are before age five, if we are really to change people’s opportunities and allow them to develop their best selves. I hope that when we conclude the debate, the Minister will say more about how important it is to weight those life chances before age five. By all means we should measure children at 16 and all sorts of other ages if we wish, but if we are serious about changing the life chances of the very poorest children in our constituencies, we must consider a series of life chances long before they reach school. Every reception teacher I met would say that life chances have been decided by the time that children come into school.

I welcome how the debate has developed in the past 10 years, and I hope I have stated clearly why I think the Lords are mistaken with Lords amendment 1, and how much I agree with the case put by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) who stated her support for Lords amendments 8 and 9.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I was going to call Mr Maynard.

Paul Maynard: I have already spoken.

Mr Speaker: Ah, I did not realise the fellow had already spoken. [Interruption.] No, no, I do not think he needs to repeat his speech! He was on the list, but had not been ticked off it. Never mind. We will hear from another fellow instead, Mr Peter Heaton-Jones.

4.15 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who speaks with unrivalled expertise on these matters. I agree with his fundamental point. I speak to oppose Lords amendment 1, which seeks to amend clause 4, as passed by this House. I do so as a member of the Bill Committee that scrutinised the Bill—during 15 sittings or so, if I recall—last autumn. Clause 4, as passed by this House, introduces a new duty for the Secretary of State to report annually on two Life Chances measures: first, the proportion of children living in workless households; and secondly, as has been mentioned, their educational attainment at age 16. In effect, therefore, it repeals most of the Child Poverty Act 2010.

The Lords amendments in effect seek to replicate the parts of the 2010 Act that relate to the measurement of the proportion of children living in poverty. In particular, their lordships’ amendments seek to require the Secretary of State to report on four specific measures: relative low income; combined low income and material deprivation; absolute low income; and persistent poverty.

However, the Bill, as passed by this House, does not mean that the Government will stop measuring and publishing such data on household income. The Government will continue to publish annually low-income data in the HBAI publication. Those data include—Members may get a sense of déjà vu all over again—relative low income, combined low income and material deprivation. They probably ring bells, because those categories replicate almost exactly the measurements that the amendments from the other place seek to reinstate in the Bill. To put it simply, the Government are already doing it. The information is available for all to see and will continue to be so. The HBAI publication has protected status as a national statistics product and Ministers have undertaken in this House to publish the data annually. Lords amendment 1 is—I say this with the greatest respect—simply unnecessary. Its effect would merely be to replicate something the Government are already doing.

Neil Gray: My understanding, with all due respect to the hon. Gentleman, is that there is no statutory obligation for that reporting. There is certainly no statutory obligation to eradicate child poverty by a specified time, which is crucial.

Peter Heaton-Jones: The Government have made a commitment to continue to publish the data annually. They have been very clear about that fact. When it comes to the relationship between those measurements and the eradication of child poverty, under the previous Labour Government the number of households where nobody worked doubled and in-work poverty increased: the Government missed their child poverty target by 600,000.

The Bill, as passed by this House, does not redefine poverty to exclude income, as some of its opponents often say. That argument assumes that measuring income
is an effective, helpful or comprehensive way of measuring poverty in the first place. It is, in fact, none of those things. In that respect, the 2010 Act was flawed in its approach. The current income measures enshrined in the Act show that the number of children in relative poverty can actually go down in a recession and up in times of growth. That is simply perverse. Furthermore, the measures incentivise what is often known as a “poverty plus a pound” approach, where families can seemingly be moved out of poverty without any change whatever in the underlying factors that got them into the position of low income in the first place. The Act is simply not doing what it is intended to do.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): It is interesting to hear my hon. Friend’s points. Does he agree that under current measures the only way completely to eliminate relative poverty would be to collapse the economy completely and make absolutely everyone poor?

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: It sounds like my hon. Friend has been reading the Labour party’s manifesto. The 2010 Act is flawed, and in seeking, in effect, to reinstate its provisions, the Lords amendments are similarly found wanting.

Let us look at what the Bill, as passed by this House, actually does in its current format and why their lordships’ amendments are not in my estimation constructive in seeking to reverse these measures. The Bill enshrines in legislation the Government’s commitment to end child poverty and to improve children’s life chances. It focuses on the actions that we know will make the biggest difference to the life chances of children and young people—both now and in the future. We need measures that drive the right action to tackle the root causes of poverty rather than just tackling the symptoms. That is why the Bill introduces the new life chances measures of worklessness and educational attainment.

The Government’s policies in targeting life chances importantly look at outcomes, not inputs—it is a comprehensive approach—recognising that the real route out of poverty is through work, not welfare. Some 74% of previously less well-off, workless families who found work have escaped “the poverty trap”, if one can use that phrase.

The Bill seeks to replace the wholly arbitrary measure that a household is in poverty if its income is below 60% of the median wage. That is totally arbitrary. In a recession, with all households’ income tending to reduce, it gives the completely false impression that fewer households are in poverty because their relative income is seen to rise. It is totally perverse—a recession leading to less poverty. The figures simply do not add up. It is a discredited system, and it did nothing under the previous Government to tackle the underlying root cause of childhood poverty. I therefore submit that these amendments are wrong to try to reinstate that old discredited system. It beggars belief that some people believe that we can base our strategy for improving children’s life chances on income measures that would suggest that the last recession somehow caused a significant fall in child poverty. Of course we should not do so, but that would be the effect of the Lords amendments if this House accepts them.

**Neil Gray**: That is why, of course, it is important to have a package of measures, so that we can look at all aspects of how children and their families are living in poverty. We should not assess just relative low-income measures; we should include other measures such as material deprivation, which is critically important.

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: Material deprivation is one of the things that will continue to be measured by the HBAI statistics. It will still be included—[Interruption.] I am sure that the Minister will rise to her feet and reflect this fact; a commitment has been made that the measure of material deprivation will continue to be published annually. It will continue to be part of the official ONS Government statistics. The hon. Gentleman says that we need a package of measures, but that is exactly what we get. We get the HBAI information; we get those statistics; we get the commitment that these data will be published annually and enshrined, as I say, by the ONS. On top of that, we get what the Government suggested in the original Bill, which this House passed—further measures of attainment. We get the best of both worlds.

**Neil Gray** rose—

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will not give way again. He has already had a couple of bites at this particular cherry—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. Let me gently say to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) that he has already given us the benefit of his views for no fewer than 19 minutes, by which I assure him we are all greatly gratified, but 11 Members still want to speak. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly in order in trying to intervene, but I am trying to set out the context, and I know colleagues will want to be considerate of each other.

**Peter Heaton-Jones**: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall take what you say as a gentle reminder for me to move things on, too. I shall do so.

Moving households closer to employment is what improves the life chances of young people in the long term. That is why the Government are focusing on getting parents into work, and then getting their children into work through education. We are tackling the cycle of deprivation that has stifled the ability of too many children to reach their full potential for too long, and has condemned generation after generation to a life in which underachievement and a lack of aspiration become inevitable.

The Government are seeking to change that cycle fundamentally. We are committed to the far more effective approach of targeting the root causes of poverty, which include a lack of educational attainment and family stability. Work remains the best route out of poverty, and higher educational attainment is the best route into work. That is why the Bill that was passed in the House of Commons seeks to introduce two key measures of poverty, namely the proportion of children living in workless households and educational attainment at the age of 16. The Government are focusing on those factors because they have the greatest impact on child poverty and the life chances of children. The Lords amendments propose a reliance on spurious measures
which will do nothing to tackle the problems at their sources. They are misguided, and we should therefore not support them.

**Alison McGovern:** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling to speak in this important debate. I shall be as quick as I can.

Let me begin by pointing out to the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) that we already measure educational attainment, and we already measure worklessness. It is not a question of what we should repeat; it is a question of what matters. I shall not go into detail about the hon. Gentleman’s comments about “spurious measures”. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will do that shortly, so I shall leave it to her.

I want to return the debate to the basics. What are we debating today? What do we mean by transparency in regard to child poverty? That is a very simple question about what we in the House believe poverty to be. Should it be defined as a measure of income, or as a measure of educational attainment or worklessness? We already apply those measures to other statistical estimates of what is going on in our country, but what does the law say about what poverty is?

I asked myself this question: does the amount of money that people have make them poor? Well, it seems obvious to me that it does. A parent—a lone parent, for instance—might not be well paid and might be unable to work many hours. That parent would not suffer from worklessness, but he or she would still be poor. A child might achieve great things at school, securing all the certificates and qualifications, and still suffer the effects of not having enough money at home. Plenty of children go to school, work hard and do well, despite seeing their parents suffer from the stress of trying to pay the mortgage or the rent, or not having enough money to put in the electricity meter so that they can wash their school uniforms. That happens to plenty of children. This is not about educational attainment or worklessness; it is about the fact that the cause of poverty is not having enough money.

Why does that matter? It matters because, in the coming years, the Tories are going to make children poor, and, specifically, they are going to make children poor. We know that, because the Institute for Fiscal Studies and, specifically, they are going to make children poor. We have some fantastic schools in this country, which help children to achieve despite poverty at home.

The next question is straightforward: what should we do about the situation? The Government have made it clear that they do not think money makes a difference to life chances. I have made it clear that I think it does, but why would anyone listen to me? I am a Labour politician. However, there is independent evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) mentioned some of it in her fantastic speech, but I can add the information that Kitty Stewart and Kerris Cooper, of the London School of Economics, reviewed 34 studies of whether family incomes affected children’s outcomes throughout the OECD, and found that family income mattered. What is the point of having some of the world’s finest researchers if we do not listen to them? We know from an FOI request that of the 250 replies on the issue to Government consultations, only two agreed with their desire to forget about reporting on the income target. The vast majority of people agreed that money matters.

4.30 pm

In conclusion, I say that this issue matters and that the Lords are right for two reasons: it matters because of the principle and it matters because of the evidence. It is possible to be poor and in work in our country, and it is possible to be poor and do well at school in our country, and it matters what those people’s lives are like. We must not forget about being transparent about the poverty in our country. It is the cause of ill health and distress, and that is why in principle it matters. The evidence says that money matters, alongside a good education and a healthy life, to outcomes. So if we do not act on money, we embed disadvantage in our country. Therefore, let us not say to those who work too hard for too little, “You don’t count.” Let us not say to children doing well at school despite poverty at home, “You don’t count.” On behalf of those families and all families and their children, I ask the Government to think again.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): I would like to address Lords amendments 8 and 9 and the question of employment and support allowance and the work-related activity group, which is the group of people who currently have limited capacity for work.

I support the Government’s intention to enable more people who are on ESA to go back into work, but, as the Minister said, that is not happening, with only 1% per month of that group of nearly 500,000 people returning to work. The Government’s proposal to combat that is to remove the additional amount paid, starting from the 14th week, to people assessed as being within that group, and at the same time they wish to introduce a completely new system of support designed to help people back into work. The new system of support will be set out in a White Paper, which has not yet been published.

What we do know is that the system is expected eventually to be funded with approximately £100 million a year, and I will come back to that.

That White Paper is incredibly important to the matter we are discussing, because it is the replacement for what the Government are proposing to remove. I would like to set out four things that I believe the new system of support that the Government are proposing must have within it.

First, it must ensure that people’s assessments are done much more quickly than at present. Currently, people are waiting for assessments for months, and during that time they receive just the basic assessment rate, which is the equivalent of jobseeker’s allowance, regardless of whether they eventually go into the WRAG or the support group. For those whose condition means they have costs additional to what is assumed for those on JSA—for instance, as has been mentioned, energy bills—that can mean a struggle to pay those costs. That can lead to their going into debt, regardless of whether they eventually go into the support group or the WRAG, or indeed into neither. I believe that all work capability assessments should be completed well within the 13 weeks
for which claimants are on the assessment rate so that they are not put at a disadvantage by the slowness of the system. I would like to see clear evidence in the White Paper that that is going to happen, because it would benefit not just people going into the WRAG but people going into the support group.

Secondly, the assessments themselves need to be more sensitive. That particularly applies to people with mental health conditions, who are about 50% of those in the WRAG. That is another reason for ensuring that people have their assessments rapidly. If they have mental health conditions and need support, the earlier they receive it, the better. As the noble Baroness Meacher said in the other place:

“Common sense tells us that someone with an anxiety disorder or depression will find rising debts and the prospect of eviction from their home impossible to cope with.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 27 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 1306.]

Thirdly, the new system of support will need to be based on clear evidence of what works for people, so I ask the Minister whether the proposals in the White Paper will be piloted to see whether they work, or whether they will be based on current best practice. If it is the former, there is little time, as they will need to be in place by April 2017.

Fourthly, the new system must include a full and accessible scheme for cash payments over and above the assessment rate to meet additional costs if people have them. I have already referred to the extra energy costs arising from people having to stay at home much more as a result of their illness or disability. There may also be costs for special diets and so on. I mention accessibility because I have seen schemes where support is available but very difficult to obtain—people have to jump through hoops to get it. Anyone who is assessed for the WRAG under the new system should therefore automatically be asked about additional costs resulting from their condition that are not covered by PIP. Those costs should be evaluated rapidly and, if accepted, met. When the White Paper is published, I will look for it to address those four points.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I want to speak to Lords amendments 1, 8 and 9. When I came into the Chamber this afternoon, I did not intend to say much about Lords amendment 1, but I was so incensed by the way in which the Minister dealt with the issue earlier, and by her total lack of compassion for anyone who might be affected by the measures in the Bill, that I thought I must say something. I must point out to the House the contrast between her approach and that taken by the Bishop of Durham when he moved amendment 1 in the other place, because his approach was measured, based on evidence and full of compassion and care for the people affected. He pointed out what I think is self-evident to most of us in this Chamber, which is that “low income is an important influence on children’s outcomes and life chances”.

In fact, we have had an often bizarre discussion today in which there is the suggestion that, somehow, child poverty is about a whole collection of measures, and nothing to do with income, which is clearly ludicrous. The Bishop of Durham said that “the Government’s concern about the current child poverty measures is that they have encouraged an overdependence on income transfers, diverting attention from policies that tackle the root causes of poverty.”

He said that, as I pointed out earlier, Lords amendment 1 “does not seek to reassert the primacy of the existing child poverty measures: it simply requires that income-based measures of poverty be reported on alongside, and on a level footing with, other life chance indicators, such as worklessness and educational attainment, in order to acknowledge the significance of family income for children’s well-being and future prospects.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 1047.]

That is particularly important, because we have an assessment from the Institute for Fiscal Studies showing that the Government’s desire to close the fiscal deficit chiefly through spending cuts means that the prognosis for child poverty over this decade is bleak. We do not
[Dr Blackman-Woods] want a range of Government measures that make it more difficult for us to assess the impact of cuts on child poverty and the direct relationship between child poverty and low income. I have heard nothing from the Minister today to persuade me that she is following the right approach.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I hear what the hon. Lady is saying, but is she not advocating a return to the past? Does she not recognise that it is not an either/or situation, but a both situation? Reintroducing child poverty measures is, at the very least, arbitrary and could have unintended consequences.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just point out that if Members continue in this way, and it is perfectly in order for them to do so, there will be some who will not get in? It is as simple as that. If everyone speaks for five minutes or more and takes interventions, a number of people will not get called to speak. It will be no good blaming the Chair; you will have to blame each other.

Dr Blackman-Woods: There is no way at all that we can say that the relationship between a person’s income and poverty is an arbitrary measure. I say to the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) that I have made it very clear, for the third time now, that Lords amendment 1 is about requiring an income-based measure alongside—not instead of—other measures.

We have heard many attacks on Labour’s record this afternoon. Labour reduced child poverty by almost 1 million. The independent assessment by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and others was that it was a remarkable achievement, certainly without historical precedent in the UK, and impressive compared with other countries too. Rather than deriding our record, perhaps the Conservative party should see what it can do to build on it.

I turn briefly to Lords amendments 8 and 9. I am sure that many Members have heard from a number of their constituents about them, and I wish to talk about someone who wrote to me yesterday. She suffers from multiple sclerosis. She wrote:

“I’m writing to ask you to support the amended Bill and ensure Clauses 13 and 14 remain out of the Bill when it is debated in the House of Commons. If this benefit were reduced, it could have significant implications for people who have MS and other people living with a long-term condition, in some cases making their health worse and pushing them even further from employment. Having a long-term condition such as MS is expensive. It adds extra costs to finding employment or training that people who receive jobseeker’s allowance don’t experience. These costs include things like paying for taxis to get to and from interviews.

Lord Low of the proposed reductions in ESA also found no evidence to support the Government’s argument that £30 was a disincentive to work, which has been given as a rationale for these Clauses. The report also highlighted the negative impact that this reduction would have for people with disabilities like MS. Keeping clauses 13 and 14 in the Bill doesn’t make sense.”

I could not put it any better. We have received a great deal of testimony from our constituents, along with the excellent review by Lord Low and Baronesses Grey-Thompson and Meacher, which the Government have simply ignored. I ask the Minister to think again and listen to the people who know something about the possible impact of this policy.

Paul Scully: I should like to speak to Lords amendments 1 and 8. In looking at child poverty, I am worried about the numbers for the income targets that we have discussed. My concern is that the Government are effectively just managing the situation, rather than tackling the problem. The Bill seeks to refocus our approach so that we concentrate solely on tackling the root causes of poverty, rather than wringing our hands and looking at the symptoms.

Between 2003 and 2008, the Government spent roughly £300 billion on child poverty, but the figures remained broadly unchanged. Such examples show that we need a different approach. We have heard that the reporting of incomes has had a perverse effect on child poverty. In a recession, poverty can decrease. Conversely, in periods of economic growth poverty can go up.

Let us concentrate on those root causes. The deadline for the elimination of child poverty has been discussed, but we need to think how we would meet an arbitrary deadline if we do not understand what we are trying to tackle. We need to understand the root causes of poverty, and focus on those.

The Minister has made a commitment to continue to publish the figures on low incomes in the annual report on households below average income. The report uses national statistics, so it is guaranteed on that basis. As I have said, we have heard the Minister’s commitment to publishing those figures every year. We have been asked by the Opposition if the figures can be reported alongside information on life chances. However, that reinforces the perverse consequences that can result, so it is important that we focus solely on what will help to eliminate child poverty.

Turning to changes to ESA, 61% of people in WRAG want to go back to work. The majority of people who are out of work want to go back to work, so it is important that we focus support and help people. We should offer a safety net for people who cannot go back to work, and we should do everything that we can to support people who can go back to work and want to do so. WRAG was set up with good intentions, but unfortunately it has not been effective enough. It is not right that we have a system in which only one in 100 people can find work, whereas one in five JSA claimants go back to work.

The intermediate WRAG arrangement has become a long-term waiting room, entrenching worklessness, because it focuses on the symptoms, not the root causes. That is why I am keen that we take the cash—up to £100 million a year by 2020-21—and repurpose it to address the needs of the people in that group.

I understand the concerns of colleagues about what will be in the White Paper and how the process will work, but as a member of the Committee considering the Bill I have seen the dedication of providers, disability charities and support groups, their commitment to the people they seek to help, and the skills and experience they have. That is why I know that the taskforce that is being set up will help to bring in the expertise of the charities, providers, support organisations, think-tanks and local authorities. I ask colleagues to have faith in the experience and expertise of those people, which will give us a solid basis on which to spend that money.
As the national living wage and personal allowances increase, we have an opportunity to tackle childhood poverty and bring people into work. We must make sure that work pays more than benefits, and that the system supports vulnerable people and is fair to people in work who pay their taxes.

Helen Goodman: I begin by addressing amendment 1. The Labour Government had four poverty measures when we took through the Child Poverty Act 2010—absolute, relative and persistent poverty and material deprivation. We measured all of them. Between 1997 and 2010 we cut the number of children living in relative poverty by 1 million, and the number of children living in absolute poverty by 2 million. There is nothing arbitrary about this. It is important to have those measures because they are used across the OECD. That enables us to compare our performance with that of the other countries that UNICEF studies.

Ministers want to abandon those targets because they intend to freeze benefits and cut child tax credits if there are more than three, four or five children in a family. Those measures will increase the number of children living in poverty. Because they do not want that to be evident to the whole world, they do not want to use the targets. We should not let them off the hook.

We all think life chances matter. We are all interested in the correlations between the kind of childhood people have and what happens to them later in life. No one is saying that we do not want to measure those things, but I remind the House that not being able to go on a school trip, never having a holiday, not having a birthday party—these things matter in themselves because children are not human becoming, but human beings. Childhood is a part of life. The quality of life in the early years matters just as much as it matters what our lives are like or what the quality of our parents’ life is like.

On amendments 8 and 9, I want to bring into the House the voice of the people affected. Those in the ESA support group are not people who are not working out of perversity or because they have not done the arithmetic and do not know what the incentives are. They are not in work because the jobs do not exist, or because of the barriers to work. They may have problems with transport, they may be stressed, they may be exhausted or they may be struggling against extremely difficult odds. In my constituency there are 860 people in the ESA work-related activity group. I get letters from them and have meetings with them every single week.

This week I heard from a woman who wrote:

“My husband…has been in receipt of ESA-Support Group benefit…for some considerable time due to long standing health problems of both a physical and psychological nature. He has recently had to resubmit the…questionnaire and we have just had notification that he has been placed in the Support Group but this will only be until November…His last award was for three years. Considering the…letter from the GP”—and the psychologist—“we can’t believe the DWP think it is in any way appropriate to put my husband through this process twice within the same year…He will now spend…months worrying and becoming increasingly anxious about having to face the process again”.

She adds that he is “extremely vulnerable”. Treating this group of people in that way is not helpful. Making them poorer, not helping them to heat their homes or to eat properly, and making them anxious about whether they can pay their rent is not helpful.

The week before I received that letter, I had a letter from another constituent, who said:

“I’m petrified. Atos did my ESA medical…yet they still lied. I’d told them my disabilities and…they didn’t mention any of them…I was called by a woman from the DWP who told me my ESA was cancelled. She seemed happy (really happy) to gloat about this…I had to live on my 9 year old daughter’s £20 child benefit and child tax credit for 4 weeks. It takes a split second to stop benefits but 4 weeks to reinstate.”

She has now been told she must provide her own medical records, which will cost £500 because doctors are charging to provide them. She continues:

“I can’t afford this on £102 a week… I’ve not slept in ages”.

She adds that she has “cried a lot” because she knows what will happen to her.

That is the situation people are already in, and we absolutely cannot see them pushed down even further. I appeal to the Minister’s better nature. I appeal to her to think again about amendments 8 and 9.

Kevin Foster: It has been an interesting debate so far. The Opposition contribution that was of most interest to me was probably that of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), and it is a pity that others did not take a lead from him.

Let me start with the measures of child poverty. Using measures of relative income as the main driver can have some bizarre impacts. For example, we focus on those just under the line, not those who are most in need or most desperate, and we try to get them over the line to make the numbers work. As I touched on in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), that approach can inspire the view that making the whole of society poorer will end relative poverty, even though no one is better off. As we heard, the bizarre outcome is that a recession is, in theory, the best news when it comes to reducing child poverty, whereas, in a boom, things would be the other way round.

That is why it is right to focus on creating real life chances. I speak as someone whose mother grew up on a council estate and whose father worked for 37 years in Devonport dockyard—he had to work hard with his hands to get what he could for his family. That is important: this is about social mobility and achievements such as those.

A Scottish National party Member noted in an intervention that it makes sense to measure these things not just at 16, but all the way through education. There is perhaps more work to be done, therefore, and I look forward to what the vaudeville says, but it is important to look at what our education system turns out at the end of the day. One example that has been given is that, a few years back, more children came out of Eton with three As at A-level, allowing them to get to top universities, than came out of the entire cohort of children on free school meals in England. That really is a thought-provoking point. We may disagree about how best to tackle it, but it is certainly no great compliment to our system.

Employers with jobs want people with skills. They want to employ people and to put them into high-paid job. However, they find that people just do not have the
we have not had a cumulative impact assessment. Some had impact assessments on some of these measures, but these people are stuck at home; they do need to keep dealt with patients like that as a breast cancer surgeon.

and people in the ESA WRAG losing £30 a week. I measures: a benefit cap being reduced or a benefit statutory aim of eradication. We see many the phrase, the measurements, and not just the reporting about airbrushing it out of existence by removing the impact that child poverty has on health. The University of Liverpool has estimated that we lose 1,400 children a year under the age of 15 because of poverty. That number is equivalent to the size of a big secondary school. If the roof of a secondary school was collapsing every year, we would be out there doing something about it, but we do not. This is about neonatal mortality, infant mortality, accidents, violence, suicide, addiction and alcoholism, and the problem is that we think we can just ignore it.

Earlier in the debate, we talked about mental health. Children in the poorest quartile have three times the incidence of mental health problems. If their parents suffer from depression and stress, which we know is aggravated by poverty, they have a 60% increase in mental health problems. There is a five times higher incidence of infant mortality. The Marmot report estimated that the deaths of one in four children before the age of one could be prevented if their mothers had had the same nutrition, health, chances and lack of stress as the people who are most comfortable.

Five times as many children who are in the poorest quartile are likely to die as a result of road traffic accidents, while 15 times as many are likely to die as a result of a fire. Malnutrition is on the increase. There is evidence of low iodine and low folate in teenage girls as a result of poor nutrition. That leads to cretinism and spina bifida. We are going to produce generations of children who will suffer in the future. Marmot said that disadvantage starts before birth and accumulates through life.

I am not against including a measure of life chances. I do not accept that we have to choose between two separate horses. We can measure both. The only life chances that are being talked about are worklessness and educational attainment at 16, which is long after the horse has bolted. Two thirds of children in poverty have a working parent, so they will simply be dismissed. At 16, we have no chance to do something.

I accept the argument of the hon. Member for Torbay that we need to develop measures, but we also need interventions. We keep hearing that there is going to be a focus on changing these children’s lives, but how are we going to do that? There should have been a White Paper first so that we could know what was being offered to change their lives, because they will cost us throughout their lives, through failed education, worklessness, ending up in the justice system and addiction.

It makes sense to invest money in their childhood so they are not a year behind. American research has also found that their brains do not develop to the same level as others. We need to change that, but we must not simply think that by ignoring the phrase “child poverty” it will disappear. There should be a statutory obligation to report it and we should aim, as was promised, to eradicate it by the end of this Parliament.
Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be given the opportunity to speak in this debate. I consider myself to be a proud and loyal member of the Conservative party, and as such I believe it is my duty to hold the Government to account and to help them when they lose their way. I am very proud to have had a number of conversations with the Minister for Employment, who is very happy to listen and talk. She is very welcoming and tries to work with others to achieve change. I was very happy with some of the reassurances she gave me, but I am sure that Opposition Members will be delighted to know that I will join them in the Lobby when we vote on Lords amendments 8 and 9 in about half an hour, because I am not happy with all the assurances I was given by others in the Department.

I want to clarify a few things. On the ESA WRAG and ESA support group, we are talking about 500,000 people who have been defined as being too ill to work under the measures introduced by the coalition Government in 2010. They have already been assessed as needing more support to go into work.

The fact that one in 100 are leaving that group and going into work is our failure. Something has gone wrong with the back to work programme. I am not proud of that. I was very keen to support the back to work programme, and disabled constituents of mine were very happy when we introduced it, because they felt that, for the first time in their lives, they would be given the opportunity to get out there and get real, practical support to get back into work. They do not want training sessions or to be taught new skills that are of no use whatsoever to them by a company that gets paid to do so. They are interested in getting back to work, and that is what I and the Government are interested in, too, but the problem is that, although we all want the same thing, we differ on how to get there.

The ESA support group consists of people who are just too ill to work. We are effectively saying, “We’re not writing anybody off, but if you’re in the support group you don’t need to find work, we won’t really give any support and we’ll just leave you there.” I am concerned that, by abolishing the ESA WRAG for new claimants—the Minister has been clear that that does not apply to existing claimants—from April 2017, we will push more people into the support group. Someone with a progressive disease such as motor neurone disease, which is getting worse and worse, will end up being pushed into the support group as fast as possible. I have a problem with that.

The Disability Benefits Consortium has said that almost half of those in the ESA WRAG have mental and behavioural disorders, which include mental health issues, learning disabilities and autism. Before the debate, we had an urgent question about the Government providing an extra £1 billion for mental health. Almost half—248,000—of the 500,000 people in the ESA WRAG have mental health issues. With that £1 billion going to the NHS, we have to wonder what we can do to support back into work those who have learning difficulties, autism or a variety of other issues. Some employers simply do not want them. Some small businesses find it very difficult to employ them. How do we go out and find them that opportunity? How do we find them a real job, as opposed to a fake job?

Parkinson's UK, Rethink and Mind jointly say: “This policy is poorly conceived. It will ultimately cause unintended harm and push sick and disabled people further from employment.” Scope has said that the changes will disincentivise disabled people from finding work and will create a greater incentive for people to want to be placed in the support group. Macmillan has said that the changes will have a significant, detrimental impact on people affected by cancer. The bottom line is that the charities with which the Government will work in the taskforce to help to deliver the changes that will be in the White Paper are very concerned about the changes and do not see how they will work.

I do not accept that £30 a week is an incentive for somebody not to go to work. Most Conservatives do not accept that. Most Conservatives consider it to be their proud duty to look after the disabled. Ideologically, we have no issue about providing a welfare system that is a safety net for those who need support when they fall on hard times, to help people back into work. My concern is that the way in which the Bill will be perceived, and its practical implications, will lead some people who have disabilities to feel as though they are being pushed into the support group or into work.

I have a technical question for the Minister, which I hope she will be able to answer later this evening or in the next few weeks. If some of the original 500,000 people in the ESA WRAG find work but cannot cope with it, will they be able after April 2017 to go into something like the ESA WRAG, which will no longer exist? Or will they just have to push themselves towards the support group? Will there be an incentive to do so?

There are lots of other points that I would like to make, but as we are running out of time I will make one quick point. We have heard that £100 million is being reinvested, but we are taking £640 million away, so £540 million is going. If we are that keen on it, why do we not reinvest the whole £640 million into helping people back into work?

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I will be brief, because other Members have covered some of the points that I wanted to make. The Welfare Reform and Work Bill will create hardship across our country and push people further into poverty. Child poverty is rising, and independent projections from the IFS show that the fall in child poverty rates that we saw under Labour is at risk of being reversed. We hear from the Children’s Society that if the proposals in the Bill are enacted, we should expect child poverty to rise even more steeply.

Research by End Child Poverty identified that 4.1 million families and 7.7 million children have been affected by below-inflation rises in child benefit and child tax credit over the past three years. One in five families said that they had cut back on food and heating because benefits have been increased below inflation. The Government’s attempts to mask the impact of child poverty by removing income as a measure will fool nobody. Child poverty should be something that we all recognise and want to combat. Sadly, the Government seem to be trying to bury the effects of their social security policies on child poverty; it appears that the Government are far from taking the situation seriously.

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has indicated that 1.5 million children live in poverty because their working parents do not earn enough to
secure a basic standard of living. As was mentioned earlier, the commission stated in its December 2015 report that

“it is not credible to try to improve the life chances of the poor without acknowledging the most obvious symptom of poverty, lack of money.”

I believe that the Government’s position is just not credible.

I turn to the Government’s proposals to cut ESA in the WRAG. If clauses 13 and 14 of the Bill are accepted, the financial support for claimants in that group will be cut by 25%, from £102 to £73. That will have a drastic impact on both disabled people who are in work and disabled people who are out of work. In view of the fact that the Government have committed to protecting support for disabled people, that is deeply worrying. This cut will not incentivise people, which is what the Government say they want to do. The cut has been opposed in the other place, and I hope that the Government will now listen and scrap clauses 13 and 14.

5.15 pm

I am concerned about the impact of the assessments on people with mental health problems. The significant cut, if clauses 13 and 14 are approved, may well mean that people with mental health problems become more unwell and that they cannot spend money on support and activities that would help them to recover, which will have an impact on their ability to move closer to work. Rather than increasing the number of people in work, the cut may actually hinder recovery and push people further away from work. Currently, there are nearly 500,000 disabled people in the WRAG nationally. The largest group is made up of those with mental and behavioural disorders, which includes mental health issues, learning disabilities and autism. We know from a parliamentary review that 69% of disabled people said that such a cut in ESA would cause their health to suffer.

Finally, I believe the Government should accept Lords amendments 1, 8 and 9. I hope that the Minister will signal that she is willing to consider what action she and the Government will take to review this situation and to end the huge amount of undue worry and stress that the Government will take to review this situation and to end the huge amount of undue worry and stress that the proposals are causing, particularly for disabled people. The Government need to show some common sense and compassion, and they should support the Lords amendments.

Mr Burrows: I will speak to Lords amendments 1, 8 and 9. Let us be realistic: we can get involved in adversarial politics on poverty, but we are all in the same business of wanting to alleviate child poverty. Whether or not Lords amendment 1 is agreed to, we need to recognise that it would not in itself transform the lives of children in poverty. Similarly, the previous Government’s focus was on income-related measures, but they were not in themselves going to transform child poverty.

The issue could be used, as it was in the speech by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), to parade the child poverty credentials of the previous Labour Government. We could spend our time—we have not got much time—criticising that approach and saying that it did not get to the root causes of poverty and truly transform the outcomes for those most in need.

Lords amendment 1 is about reporting data and about how to focus activity, including Government measures, on those who are most in need. We need to ask what will focus Government policy on this issue like a laser. Despite some of the lurid claims, not least those made by the hon. Lady, the policy was not in any way a device to hide cuts. Let us get rid of that idea, because that is not what this is about. This is about making a genuine attempt not so much to redefine child poverty, but to refocus attention on its root causes.

As has been seen during the long passage of the Bill, this reiteration of the policy has had cross-party support, as well as support from many NGOs involved in fighting child poverty, particularly the Centre for Social Justice, which has worked hard in this area. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, hit the right tone. We want to ensure that we do not distract attention from what is needed to transform people’s life chances. That is what the issue is about.

I am concerned about what Lords amendment 1 would do. This well-intentioned amendment received support from many in the other place, but it would go back to and reintroduce arbitrary measures. Such points have been made—I will not repeat them—by my hon. Friends the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster), for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) and for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). For example, Lords amendment 1 would risk the reintroduction of measures based on current parental income, which would take away the focus on raising attainment and on increasing life chances for disadvantaged children.

I do, however, have a way forward to propose. I cannot deal with it in relation to Lords amendment 1, which will simply reintroduce child poverty measures with all their failings, but we must look for such a way that recognises the potential opposition in the Lords. As we all acknowledge, financial poverty has a significant effect on life chances. We cannot ignore that, and Government publications on such measures have proved that point. We must therefore look at how to make reference to financial poverty, but keep the particular focus on tackling the risks to life chances.

Eventually, if the Bill goes back to the other place, I propose that consideration is given to an income measure that will act not as a focus in itself, but as a gateway to other measures, and that will ensure Government policy is directed, as it currently is, to those most in need of support. We should consider introducing a gateway measure for families based both on whether they have a low income and on life chances risk measures, with a particular focus on those in permanent poverty. It would ensure that maximum support is given to those stuck in poverty, and that the Government focus on those who are most in need.

Briefly on Lords amendments 8 and 9, I share the concerns that were well rehearsed by my hon. Friends the Members for South Cambridgeshire ( Heidi Allen), for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). We met the Minister together. I recognise that the Minister and the Secretary of State have a genuine commitment to this as a reforming measure.
We really need to get the White Paper out there so that the Government’s commitment to reform can be seen clearly.

I recognise that the WRAG is not fit for purpose, as only 1% are getting into work, but it does have a purpose. It has a purpose for the most vulnerable individuals, for whom the financial element of £30 really matters. The way we show our compassion is in how we treat the few, not the many. For those few people, that £30 will have a big impact on their lives. Whether we like the WRAG or not, whether we think these people should be in the support group, which they may well be moved into, or benefit from PIP, they are concerned about the loss of this payment. When dealing with those with progressive illnesses, remitting illnesses or mental health conditions—the Government’s commitment of £1 billion of investment is wonderful—what we do must be matched by careful concern.

As we move towards 2017, with the flow of new applicants, we must do all we can to reassure everyone that we are in the business of reform. We must not only enable more people to get into work, but deal with the practical elements. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford mentioned energy costs. That is undeniably an issue that must be dealt with practically. I will support the Government tonight, but we must get the White Paper out and show our practical support in meaningful ways before 2017.

I will hold the Government to account, as will my hon. Friends, to ensure that we deliver. We must show that we are on the side of these people, we must show our compassion and we must do all we can, for example through Disability Confident events like the one that I have on Friday, to show that we are on this in a way that previous Governments have not been. We must show that we want to see people’s lives transformed through work, but also that we will support people with the safety net, which we are proud of. Even after the WRAG measures, we are more generous than the previous Government were in relation to the disabled. We must not be deflected from the task of supporting people into work and supporting people in the safety net. It is not a pull factor—let us not make that case. We want to reform the measure to ensure that it really works for people who need support and are not able to get into work immediately, but let us keep our focus, as the poverty measures will do, on those who are most in need. I will hold the Government to account over the coming months to ensure that they really mean what they say.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford: Earlier today, I attended the vigil outside Parliament that has been organised by Disabled People Against Cuts to draw attention to this debate and to urge the Government to listen to what the House of Lords said about the cuts to support for disabled people and to accept its amendments. I will focus on Lords amendments 8 and 9.

The proposal to reduce employment and support allowance for WRAG by about £30 a week for new claimants has been a focal point of this debate, precisely because the Government promised that they would not cut the support for disabled people and yet are doing exactly that. They have done it indirectly through policies such as the bedroom tax and the inclusion of carer’s allowance in the benefit cap, on which I am glad the courts have forced a U-turn; and they have done it directly through cuts to the independent living fund, DLA, Motability and Access to Work. Now, they are cutting direct financial support to disabled people through the measures in this Bill. They are putting sick and disabled people on the frontline of their austerity agenda, hitting the incomes of those who are already disadvantaged. These people are being asked to take the biggest hit, even though they had the least to begin with.

The first critical point that we need to understand today is that to receive ESA, a person has to be assessed as unfit for work. Believe me, the bar on that is already pretty high. People who are too sick or disabled to work are placed either in the support group, meaning that they are not expected to look for work, or in the WRAG, where it is recognised that they have only limited capacity, but could potentially undertake preparatory activity with a view to returning to the labour market at some point. So let us be quite clear: the people who are set to lose out from the Government’s £30 a week cut to ESA are people who are not able to work because of their health.

That is why the Chancellor was talking nonsense when he spoke about this measure removing “perverse incentives” in the benefits system. It is his logic that is perverse, although his choice of language is damming and revelatory. If someone is seriously sick or disabled, reducing their income will not make them better quicker. There is not a shred of evidence to support that ill-founded fantasy, but there is plenty of evidence that financial worries and the stress associated with work capability and PIP assessments have a negative impact on people’s health. A large and growing body of evidence suggests that hardship and stress slow down recovery and push people further away from the labour market.

Some people affected by the proposed cuts will have faced long-term disadvantage because of a serious health condition or disability, and they may find it difficult to access the labour market or sustain employment. In contrast to ESA, jobseeker’s allowance is for the most part a short-term benefit. Depending on the state of the economy, the vast majority of jobseekers move off JSA in a few weeks or months, but those with long-term health conditions and disabilities are more likely to face long-term unemployment. The barriers we face are very real, and many people will have to live on extremely low incomes for lengthy periods. Many also incur extra living costs simply because of their condition or disability.

Having to get by on an extremely low income for an extended period is one factor that entrenches poverty among disabled people and those with long-term illness. People use up their savings and end up selling their assets, and they depend on others. The poverty experienced by disabled people is well documented, but it often becomes family poverty as other family members try to support loved ones financially from their own incomes, while providing unpaid care that limits their own earning potential.

The cuts to ESA will cause real hardship and are quite unnecessary. They are based on a flawed and frankly offensive misconception that people with serious long-term health conditions are malingerers who need to be prompted into work with “tough love”. A large proportion of the people who rely on ESA are those who have become disabled or developed a condition in adult life—people who have paid taxes and national insurance contributions for many years previously, with
the perfectly reasonable expectation that if they become unable to work for health-related reasons, there will be a safety net for them. That safety net must take realistic account of the extra costs of living with disability, and to reduce support is callous and plain wrong. Even the Lords recognise that, and the Government must acknowledge it and think again.

The Lords also expressed concern about the implications of universal credit for working disabled people. We know that disabled people are more likely to work in low-paid jobs, and they are at higher risk of living in poverty. The disabled worker element of working tax credit currently provides support for disabled people who are in work to cover the extra costs that they incur by holding down a job—costs that in some cases would otherwise make it financially disadvantageous to be in work. With the move to universal credit, the loss of the limited capability for work element to everyone except those in the support group means that a lot of working disabled people will be around £1,500 worse off every year. Among those who will be worst affected are disabled working parents who currently receive the disabled worker’s element of working tax credit. Under universal credit, disabled working parents will lose that extra support.

Around 43,000 families in the UK with at least one working disabled parent will take a substantial drop in income when universal credit is rolled out. As Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson pointed out in the Lords, a couple with two children and both parents working in low-paid jobs, where one parent has become disabled, could receive a massive £3,000 less in 2017. The Government say that they want to improve employment support for disabled people, but slashing the incomes of those who are already in work, and who depend on that support to keep them in work, is not the way to go about it. Surely the Government have learned lessons from the failure of the Work programme—we have heard quite a lot about that today, and I think they acknowledge that it has not worked.

Surely it is far more effective, empowering and dignified to provide extra support directly to working disabled people, so they can spend it on the transport or equipment that they need to make work viable for them. Instead, the Government seem to think that it is more effective to take money out of the pockets of working disabled people, and give it to highly paid executives and private sector companies to tell those disabled people how to provide extra support directly to working disabled people, so they can spend it on the transport or equipment they need to make work viable for them. Instead, the Government seem to think that it is more effective to take money out of the pockets of working disabled people, and give it to highly paid executives and private sector companies to tell those disabled people how to

If the Government choose to ignore the Lords today and push ahead with these measures, it will be testament to an arrogance and unwillingness to recognise the needs of disabled people that has already seen them dragged through the courts for indirect discrimination. The Lords have made eminently reasonable amendments to the Bill that would ensure that those who need support get support at perhaps the most difficult time of their lives.

I urge Conservative Members who are wondering what to do this evening to take heed of the experiences of sick and disabled people in their own constituencies—maybe even in their own families—and support the Lords amendments in this group this evening.

5.30 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I place on record my thanks to my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for the work that is being done to shine a light on the Government and expose them for what is a cruel attack on the people who can least afford it.

It is clear that the Minister believes poverty is an inconvenience. On the Labour Benches, we believe strongly that poverty is an evil. What is the Government’s response? To see no evil, to hear no evil and to speak no evil. Why would the Government seek to hide the true scale of poverty, if not because they realise that, through their targeted attacks on the poor, including the working poor, poverty will increase? The Government do not want to see poverty, because to see it would be to expose it and would be a cause of guilt—if guilt is possible with this Government. That is why, through the benefits cap, communities will be displaced as towns and cities are socially cleansed.

The Government do not want to hear the truth about poverty, either, because to hear it would create a noise so loud that the country would not sit back and take it. That is exactly why they want to silence charities such as Barnardo’s and the Children’s Society with the gagging Act that is the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014.

The Government do not want to speak the truth about poverty, because to speak it would be hypocritical. They know that their actions are pushing more and more people into poverty and on to the breadline. That is precisely why they are blocking their own officials from publishing data on the number of people living in true poverty. We can talk about life chances, and we know how important education, health and housing are, but let us be honest: if you have to put the electricity or gas on, or put a uniform on the backs of your children, or make a decision about whether you or your children eat, then money is very, very important.

That evil affects too many families in Oldham West and Royton. Take the Coldhurst ward in my constituency, where more than 51% of children are growing up in families in poverty. Take Oldham as a town, where 40% of children are growing up in families living in poverty. It is getting worse, not better, under this Government. That is not surprising. Could any Member in this Chamber really live on £3 a day to cover food, heating, electricity, clothes, transport and toys for the children? There are too many mothers who go hungry just to feed their children. By 2021, it is estimated that
1 million more children will have been pushed into poverty. No wonder the Government do not want to report on how many people are living in poverty. It is a national scandal.

Research by the Children’s Society—a charity still able, at the moment, to give a voice to those who need one—highlights that 14,400 children in my constituency alone live in working households that will be affected by the freeze on benefits. As corporations such as Google laugh all the way to the bank, it is for my constituents to queue at the food bank. Not measuring how many people are in poverty is like driving a car with the instrument dashboard disconnected: you do not know how fast you are going; you do not know how long you have been going, or the distance you have travelled; you do not know whether you have enough fuel to last the distance; and you do not know if the car is overheating until it is too late. This is the real crux of the issue: the Government’s view is clearly that the welfare system is not a well maintained machine to be looked after and to last but a banger to drive into the ground and send to the scrapheap.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It has been a regular occurrence in my nine months in Parliament that we face another lamentable situation in which this Government, and specifically the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, are called upon to think again. Opposition Members in the other place have once again provided us with an opportunity to pause for reflection.

I wish to focus my remarks on the cruel and utterly devastating cuts to employment and support allowance for those in the work-related activity group. Let me set that out in context. A cut of £30 a week would have a huge impact on nearly all affected families and individuals in this country. We have heard in previous debates about tax credits and universal credit about the kind of impacts such a drop in income would have. The amount of £30 a week is equivalent to raising council tax for one go.

Child benefit is £20.70 a week for the first child and £13.70 for an additional child. When the Government proposed to withdraw those amounts from individuals earning enough to pay the 40% tax rate, putting them among the top 15% of earners in this country, they produced huge outrage among Government Back-Bench Members. There were newspaper campaigns—

5.36 pm

Three hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on Lords amendments, the debate was interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83F). That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

The House divided: Ayes 310, Noes 277.

Division No. 193 [5.36 pm]

AYES

Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cavendish, Marla
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colvile, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evnett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greenh, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Holloboone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel

Noes

Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cavendish, Marla
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colvile, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evnett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greenning, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinsrake, Kevin
Holloboone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lenton, Mr Ben
Lipsey, Andrew
Ling, Mrs Anne
Lore, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughlin, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCann, David
McCann, Craig
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McCluskey, Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menziez, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milan, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Moris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Olliff, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Bill
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberts, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Sherbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Stundy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swain, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Sym, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Treyevlan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warram, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
White, Chris
Whitaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Simon Kirby and Sarah Newton

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Cox, Jo
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon

Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Down, Jim
Dow, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elliot, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foxvargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gibson, Patricia
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lillian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
The House divided: Ayes 306, Noes 279.

Division No. 194  [5.51 pm]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
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Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
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Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
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Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenhurst, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Holly Lynch and
Sue Hayman

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

The Deputy Speaker then put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F.)

Clause 13

EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORT ALLOWANCE: WORK-RELATED ACTIVITY COMPONENT

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 8.—[Priti Patel.]

The House divided: Ayes 306, Noes 279.

Division No. 194  [5.51 pm]

AYES

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Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
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Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
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Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenhurst, rh James
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Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
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Question accordingly agreed to.

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Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenhurst, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Holly Lynch and
Sue Hayman
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir George
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Graying, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Guinness, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollon, Mr Philip
Holloway, rh Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sayid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kennedy, Angela
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddle, John
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackintosh, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, rh Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tanya
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Merriam, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Mrs Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Patten, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philip, Mark
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Symes, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tohur, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, rh Charles
Walker, rh Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warmann, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whatley, Helen
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Simon Kirby and
Sarah Newton

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Dr Caroline
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Austin, Iain
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Mr Margaret
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lynda
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burton, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
cow, rh Ronnie
Cox, Jo
Coyne, Neil
Crara, rh David
Crawley, Angela
Cree, Mary
Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 9.—(Priti Patel.)

The House divided: Ayes 304, Noes 280.

**Clause 14**

Cloude 14: Universal credit: limited capability for work element

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 9.—(Priti Patel.)

**Division No. 195**

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Allan, Lucy  
Amess, Sir David  
Andrew, Stuart  
Ansell, Caroline  
Argar, Edward  
Atkins, Victoria  
Bacon, Mr Richard  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Balda, Jeff  
Smith, Owen  
Smirh, Karin  
Spellar, rh Mr John  
Starmer, Keir  
Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Stringer, Graham  
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela  
Tami, Mark  
Thewliss, Alison  
Thomas, Mr Gareth  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Thompson, Owen  
Thornberry, Emily  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Tulley, Anna  
Turner, Karl  
Twig, Derek  
Twig, Stephen  
Umunya, Mr Chuka  
Vaz, rh Keith  
Vaz, Valerie  
Weir, Mike  
West, Catherine  
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitfield, Dr Philippa  
Williams, Hywel  
Williams, Mr Mark  
Wilson, Corri  
Wilson, Sammy  
Winnick, Mr David  
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie  
Wishart, Pete  
Wright, Mr lain  
Zeichner, Daniel  

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Holly Lynch and Sue Hayman

**Clause 14**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 8 disagreed to.
Tellers for the Ayes:

Simon Kirby and Sarah Newton
NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Caudby, Ruth
Cameron, Mr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clegg, rh Mr Nick
Chayt, rh Ann
Cooker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Cox, Jo
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Drover-Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elliot, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Gibson, Patricia
Gillond, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Karen
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewin-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Maclaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marston, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McCartney, Jason
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
McPartland, Stephen
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Milliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwarah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Paisley, Ian
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Simpson, David
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Sammy
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Sue Hayman and Vicky Foxcroft
Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 9 disagreed to.
Lords amendments 2 to 7 and 10 to 33 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived in respect of Lords amendments 2 to 6 and 11.
Lords amendment 34 disagreed to.
Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 34.
Lords amendments 35 to 57 agreed to.
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 1, 8 and 9;
That Neil Gray, Holly Lynch, Amanda Milling, Guy Opperman, Priti Patel, David Rutley and Owen Smith be members of the Committee;
That Priti Patel be the Chair of the Committee;
That three be the quorum of the Committee;
That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Guy Opperman.)
Question agreed to.
Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I confirm that this afternoon the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments have reached agreement on the fiscal framework? This is the arrangement that underpins the significant new powers being delivered to the Scottish Parliament by the Scotland Bill, which is currently being considered in the other place. I believe that this agreement will allow the Bill to proceed through this Parliament, and I hope very much to receive a legislative consent motion from the Scottish Parliament. I intend to make a full statement to the House tomorrow, and I will this evening appear by video link before the Scottish Parliament’s Devolution (Further Powers) Committee, after the forthcoming Scottish elections, to take on the significant new powers in tax and welfare that will make available to the most powerful and accountable devolved Parliaments in the world. I am sure that the whole House will welcome the fact that this agreement has been concluded.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The House will note that he will make a statement to the House tomorrow, which will be the opportunity for the House to discuss this matter, but he was absolutely right to bring this information to the House as soon as he was able to do so.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it in order to congratulate the Scottish and UK Governments on reaching a funding deal for devolved Government in Scotland, and to congratulate the Scottish and UK Governments on reaching a funding deal for devolved Government in Scotland, and to thank the Secretary of State for giving me personal advance notice of his point of order? I look forward to his statement tomorrow. I think it is appropriate to commend First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and Finance Secretary John Swinney for their efforts in lending off Treasury attempts to short-change Scotland to the tune of £7 billion. It would also be churlish not to acknowledge the final acknowledgement by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that the rule of no detriment was key to reaching success between the Scottish and UK Governments.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He has duly given notice to the House of the arguments he will make tomorrow.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I add my congratulations to the Secretary of State and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and indeed to the First Minister and the Finance Secretary in Scotland, on reaching this agreement? It shows us that when two people want to tango, they certainly can dance. Will the Secretary of State indulge the House by letting us know whether we will see some of the documentation before the statement tomorrow? This is a hugely complex agreement with significant figures, and I wonder whether it will be possible to get advance sight of the fiscal framework well ahead of tomorrow’s statement.

David Mundell: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am able to confirm that the documentation will be available for scrutiny. On the timing of my statement, I cannot commit to exactly when it will be.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you might provide some advice and give me your view. This afternoon in our proceedings, we were scheduled to have a Backbench Business Committee debate on serious youth violence and gang violence, which are blighting many of our inner-city areas. Unfortunately, because our business is overrunning, we will not have time for that debate and I will not be able to move my motion. However, do you not think it appropriate that we send out a message today, for those who may not be familiar with the proceedings of the House of Commons, that the fact that this debate has been delayed in no way sends a signal that this House does not appreciate the importance of the issue? I am pleased to inform the House that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee has indicated to me that an alternative slot will be found for us to have the debate at the earliest opportunity, which I hope will be next week.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is well aware that that is not strictly a point for the Chair to deal with. However, I commend him for taking the opportunity to make that very important point for those who are not familiar with the proceedings of this House, and to emphasise the fact that the subject matter of the debate that he tried to instigate today is extremely important and taken very seriously by Members from all parts of the House. I sincerely hope that the Backbench Business Committee will find time in the near future, when I am quite sure that the House will welcome the opportunity, to debate the hon. Gentleman’s very important motion.
EDUCATION AND ADOPTION BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Education and Adoption Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 22 June 2015 (Education and Adoption Bill (Programme)) and 16 September 2015 (Education and Adoption Bill (Programme) (No.2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today’s sitting.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Margot James.)

Education and Adoption Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

6.27 pm

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Lords amendments 2 to 6.

Lords amendment 7, and amendments (a) to (d) thereto.

Lords amendment 8, and amendment (a) thereto.

Mr Gibb: I am pleased to welcome the Education and Adoption Bill back to the House for consideration of amendments made in the other place. As a result of the careful scrutiny of both Houses and the strong advocacy of my noble Friend Lord Nash, the Bill returns to the House in good shape and with the potential to ensure that many more children and young people have the opportunity to realise their full potential.

Since 2010, educational standards in England have risen rapidly, and 1.4 million more pupils are now taught in schools that are judged by Ofsted to be good or outstanding. More than 80% of our schools are now good or better. Further improvements are required, however; 1.5 million pupils are still taught in schools that Ofsted judges to be less than good. To deliver educational excellence in every part of the country, we need a school system that consistently delivers high academic standards. This Bill brings forward important reforms to raise standards across the country. It will speed up the process by which failing maintained schools become sponsored academies, introduce new measures to allow us to intervene in coasting schools for the first time and ensure that we have consistent powers to take swift and decisive action when academies underperform.

Alongside reforms to improve school standards, the Bill introduces a reform of the adoption system so that more of our most vulnerable children can find stable, loving homes without delay. The way the sector has embraced the challenge of regional adoption agencies has been impressive, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Children and Families has recently announced that future funding will be available to support the sector during the transition. The move to regional adoption agencies is a widely supported manifesto commitment, and I have been delighted to see the support from across the House and in the other place for the Government’s vision. I am pleased to confirm that the adoption clause, clause 13, stands unchanged from when the Bill was first introduced.

There are eight Lords amendments to the education provisions for the consideration of the House, and the Labour party has proposed changes to two of the Lords amendments. All eight of the Lords amendments were either Government amendments or amendments that were supported by the Government, and each was accepted by all sides in the other place without a Division. I hope that we will be able to reach the same conclusion today.

Lords amendments 1 to 5 relate to coasting schools. I want to speak to the most substantive amendment in the group first, Lords amendment 5, regarding...
parliamentary scrutiny of the coasting regulations. The Government recognise the importance of Parliament scrutinising the detail of the coasting definition. Lords amendment 5 therefore requires that coasting regulations to be made under the Bill will be subject to the affirmative procedure the first time they are laid. Subject to parliamentary timetabling, we hope that that will take place once the 2016 performance data have been published and before any school is formally identified as coasting for the first time. In making the change, the Government have listened carefully to the concerns raised in both this House and the other place regarding appropriate parliamentary scrutiny of the coasting definition.

Subjecting the regulations to the affirmative procedure when they are laid for the first time represents the most proportionate approach. It will allow both Houses to scrutinise and approve the detail of the final coasting regulations without creating an ongoing burden on parliamentary time. Minor and technical changes could be required to the regulations following the publication of school performance data, which currently takes place twice each year, or as a result of changes to the layout or content of performance tables. Such changes would of course be uncontroversial, but if the regulations were subject to the affirmative resolution procedure each time we made such changes, they would require a full debate in both Houses. Under the negative procedure, Members of both Houses can still call a debate should they have any concerns about the changes proposed.

Lords amendment 1 seeks to improve the drafting of the Bill and to remove any unintentional element of subjectivity that could be read into its original wording. The original text states that a school will be eligible for intervention when it has been notified that the Secretary of State “considers” it to be coasting. We have been clear from the outset that we want schools to be certain of State “considers” it to be coasting. We have been left in any doubt about this, Lords amendment 1 proposes to revise the wording of clause 1 to remove the term “considers”. In doing so, it clarifies that whether or not a school is coasting is based on the absolute terms of the definition.

Lords amendment 2 provides the Secretary of State with the power to disapply the coasting clause of the Bill from certain types of schools. As currently drafted, the Bill would apply to all maintained schools, including special schools and maintained nursery schools. We have no intention of applying the coasting definition to some of those schools, such as maintained nursery schools, which is why we have proposed this change.

Lords amendment 3 would change the Bill’s wording to ensure the Secretary of State must make regulations to define coasting. Amendments seeking this change were tabled by the Labour party in this House, and the Government supported the amendment when it was brought forward in the other place. It has always been our intention that coasting regulations be made, and this Lords amendment will remove any doubt.

The final amendment to the coasting schools clause, Lords amendment 4, is consequential to Lords amendment 1, and is a technical change to ensure correct cross-referencing within the clause. Lords amendment 6 is also a consequential and technical amendment to make explicit two further sections of the Education and Inspections Act. I will not go into any further detail about that.

Lords amendment 7 will ensure that parents are kept informed when their child’s school is causing concern. Their ability to understand the action that is being taken to bring about improvements has been an important issue throughout the passage of the Bill. In response, the Government brought forward Lords amendment 7, which we hope will provide assurance that parents will always be kept informed when underperforming maintained schools are becoming sponsored academies.

Every parent wants their child to attend a good school. It is right that they demand quick, effective action when concerns arise. We are clear that becoming a sponsored academy will always be the solution for a maintained school that is judged inadequate by Ofsted. The Bill delivers on our manifesto commitment in that respect.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): The Minister mentions parents. Does the balance of the Bill not concern him in that it gives at least seven new powers to the Secretary of State, but not one new power to parents?

Mr Gibb: The amendments we are debating give parents an additional entitlement to receive communication from the new sponsor of an academy while the process is being undertaken. We are unapologetic about the powers we are taking in the Bill, because we want to tackle all failing schools from day one when they become failing. That was in our manifesto, so this Bill is helping us deliver yet another manifesto achievement.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Does the Minister not worry that there is no proper procedure for a good school to decouple from a failing multi-academy trust? Time and again in my constituency, we see MATs that are not doing so well. I do not want to name the schools, but the Secretary of State knows about them because I have written to her personally about the issue. There is no proper procedure for such schools to decouple and we need one.

Mr Gibb: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, but the regional schools commissioners, of which there are eight around the country who know the local conditions and the local schools, will take action—indeed, they are taking action—when a multi-academy trust is failing to raise standards in its schools. We have taken action over 120 times to remove schools from multi-academy trusts that have not been delivering the support and sponsorship that we seek.

Once a sponsor has been identified for a failing school, it is commonplace for the sponsor to engage with parents about its plans for the school to ensure that they know what to expect. Often, parents are given the opportunity to share their views about any changes that the sponsor proposes to make. Lords amendment 7 will ensure that there is greater consistency for parents because the sponsor that is identified to take over a maintained school that is eligible for intervention will...
always be required to communicate to parents its plans for improving the school before the school is converted into a sponsored academy.

The hon. Members for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) have proposed four amendments to Lords amendment 7 that would replace the requirement on the proposed sponsor to communicate information about its plans to parents with a requirement for sponsors to consult parents about their improvement plans. I hope the House will recognise that that proposed change is more than just semantics. To ensure that underperforming schools are turned around as quickly as possible, clause 8 removes the requirement to consult on whether the school should become an academy so that that process cannot be misused to delay decisive action.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab) rose—

Mr Gibb: The Government consider that to be an important step that will allow failing schools to begin receiving the expert leadership and support that the hon. Gentleman seeks from day one.

Underperforming schools are carefully matched to sponsors. Trusting educational professionals to improve schools based on their experience and expertise is central to the academies programme. The proposal to impose a requirement on sponsors to consult parents about their plans to improve a school would represent a return to the rigid approach that allowed vested interests to prevent sponsors from taking decisive action and to delay the process of transformation.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government’s proposals offer flexibility? Although there is no obligation to consult and discuss, it is always open to the regional schools commissioner and the school to discuss the issue and consult as much as possible. For example, there is a school in special measures in my constituency, and the regional schools commissioner and I have had a meeting with parents to discuss the situation at the school and the potential new sponsor. It is always open to those who are involved in education to consult as widely as possible.

Mr Gibb: My hon. and learned Friend is right, and nothing in the Bill prevents any amount of consultation, or a new sponsor from talking to staff, parents and so on. The amendment imposes a requirement on sponsors to communicate with parents. Elsewhere the Bill also prevents ideologically driven organisations and community groups that are determined to prevent a failing or underperforming school from becoming an academy from doing so. We will not tolerate failure in our school system, and we want to take action from day one.

Nic Dakin: Nobody will tolerate failure in schools. Will the Minister provide evidence of where the consultation has resulted in obstruction by vested interest?

Mr Gibb: In Committee I gave the hon. Gentleman and other members of the Committee ample illustrations of that. One example was Downhills school in Haringey, which was deeply underperforming. The process of conversion to an academy—it is now run by the Harris Federation—was drawn out, which delayed improvement in that school. It is now a highly performing primary school in Haringey, and it provides a much better quality of education. I hope that the hon. Gentleman does not want such a process to be delayed in future.

Amendment 8 relates to underperforming academies. We have always been clear that we will tackle underperformance wherever it occurs, whether in a maintained school or an academy. We recognise, however, that our formal powers on failing and coasting academies vary depending on the terms of an academy’s funding agreement. In some cases, particularly in earlier academies, that can restrict our ability to take action as strongly or as swiftly as we would want. Regional schools commissioners already take swift and effective action to secure improvements in a minority of academies that underperform. We have issued 134 formal notices to underperforming academies and free schools, and we have moved to change the sponsor in 124 cases of particular concern.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister will know that I have an academy in my constituency, which my middle son attends. It was an excellent school when he started out, but unfortunately it began to require improvement and is now inadequate—indeed, Ofsted is there today. The regional schools commissioner has no powers to intervene in that academy, so will the Minister clarify that these powers will give Vicky Beer, the north-west regional schools commissioner, the powers she needs to go in and sort out the school?

Mr Gibb: The hon. Gentleman gives an example of where such powers are needed. Regional schools commissioners are industrious and energetic in tackling underperformance in academies, but some have older funding agreements. The new funding agreements have explicit powers for the Secretary of State to intervene, and amendment 8 seeks to give the powers of the Secretary of State, and through her the regional schools commissioners, to all academies, even those with old funding agreements that do not have the powers to intervene.

In practice, Lords amendment 8 will mean that when an academy’s performance meets one of two triggers in legislation—an inadequate Ofsted judgment or performance that falls within the coasting definition—its current funding agreement will be read as having broadly the same provisions as apply to failing and coasting schools in our latest model funding agreement. That will give regional schools commissioners consistent powers to move a failing academy swiftly to a new sponsor, and to require a coasting academy to demonstrate that it can make sufficient improvement. The same coasting definition will apply to academies and maintained schools, and where an academy is coasting, as with a maintained school, it will be given the opportunity to demonstrate that it can improve sufficiently.

Andrew Gwynne: Does the Minister also recognise, when the regulations are drawn up, that it is possible for a school to be “coasting” at what appears to be a relatively high level, but that nevertheless the children are underperforming compared with what they should be achieving?

Mr Gibb: Yes. Again, the hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. The definition of coasting incorporates a progress measure, because schools that on the surface
may look as though they are performing well could easily fall within the definition of coasting when we look at the progress the children in that school make. We are determined that every child, regardless of starting point, will fulfil their absolute potential. Whether they are high performing or struggling, all pupils deserve the best education possible. That is the purpose behind using a progress measure in the definition of coasting.

6.45 pm

The Labour party proposed an amendment to Lords amendment 8, which would remove the requirement for the Secretary of State to give the proprietor of an academy the opportunity to make representations before terminating the agreement on the grounds of an inadequate Ofsted judgment. The Government have included this step in their amendment as it is a requirement under the current model funding agreement, the contract between the Secretary of State and the academy trust. As I have set out, the effect of the Government’s amendment is to bring academies with older funding agreements broadly in line with the provisions of failing and coasting academies in the latest model funding agreement. Removing the requirement to seek representations would go beyond that and would fundamentally change the funding agreement, which is a contractual agreement for all academies. I assure the House that we have not set a particular timescale for the representations process in relation to failing academies, and we will ensure it is not lengthy and bureaucratic.

I hope the House will recognise the clear progress made on the Bill since it was last debated in this place and will welcome in particular the amendments to ensure parents are kept informed of consistent, effective powers to address underperforming academies. I am confident that the Bill before us today illustrates the Government’s commitment to building a fairer society in which every child receives an excellent education and the best possible start in life. I hope that hon. Members are able to support the amendments. I commend them to the House.

Nic Dakin: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), who led for the Opposition when the Bill came through the House, as I do to all other right hon. and hon. Members who, as the Minister bore witness in his opening statement, contributed in Committee and in the Chamber to improving the Bill. I commend those in the other place who have set out, the effect of the Government’s amendment is to bring academies with older funding agreements broadly in line with the provisions of failing and coasting academies in the latest model funding agreement. Removing the requirement to seek representations would go beyond that and would fundamentally change the funding agreement, which is a contractual agreement for all academies. I assure the House that we have not set a particular timescale for the representations process in relation to failing academies, and we will ensure it is not lengthy and bureaucratic.

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I am sure we all agree that that is not good enough, and that their schools are not delivering for many pupils. I were failing to raise standards, we are again being told but, two years after Ofsted's warning that the trusts ultimately responsible for holding academies to account, Inspectorate. That is telling. The Secretary of State is

E-ACT—the two largest multi-academy trusts in the country, responsible between them for 85 schools—have received significant criticism from the Independent Schools

Chair of the Education Committee has to say, and he is

This is the second occasion on which AET and E-ACT—the two largest multi-academy trusts in the country, responsible between them for 85 schools—have received significant criticism from the Independent Schools Inspectorate. That is telling. The Secretary of State is ultimately responsible for holding academies to account, but, two years after Ofsted's warning that the trusts were failing to raise standards, we are again being told that their schools are not delivering for many pupils. I am sure we all agree that that is not good enough, and that it illustrates the size of the challenge.

Parents have a fundamental wish to be involved in their children's education. A recent survey by PTA-UK found that 97% of parents wanted to be consulted when big changes were made to how their schools were run. When a school becomes a sponsored academy and the sponsor is chosen, that represents a big change and a big deal. Parents have an important role to play in challenging—and helping—school communities to improve, and their views should be taken into account at such important moments.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Might there be a risk that the Government are laying the foundation for future legal challenges against academy trusts if the duty to inform turns out to be a duty to misinform, because they misrepresent the information to parents and they are not allowed to consult on it?

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend has done a great deal of work on the Bill, and I am sure that Ministers have heard what he has said. No doubt their legal advisers will have already looked into the point very carefully, but they may want—with his assistance—to double-check the position. Why the Government cannot trust parents is beyond me, but the House has an opportunity to put that right by voting for our amendments (a) to (d)

There is real concern about whether the pool of current and potential academy sponsors has the capacity to improve additional schools. The Government’s own statistics show that only 15% of the 20 largest chains are performing above the national average, compared with 44% of maintained schools. Since September 2012, 75% of maintained schools have gained good or outstanding judgments, compared with 69% of academies. According to the National Foundation for Educational Research, in 2014 pupils at maintained schools achieved the same high standard of GCSE results as those attending academies. The facts suggest that the Government would help schools to improve by ending their ideological obsession with academisation, and pragmatically removing the bureaucratic barriers that prevent councils from intervening in underperforming schools.

In my constituency, Priory Lane school received an Ofsted judgment that meant that it needed significant improvement. The governors indicated that they wanted to go down the academy route, but that they wanted a choice of academy sponsor. Owing to a lack of academy sponsor capacity, the Department for Education and the regional schools commissioner could offer only one option, so governors and parents were presented with a “take it or leave it” choice. Despite representations from all and sundry—including myself—the Government remained adamant that the shotgun wedding would go ahead.

I understand where the Government were coming from, and, indeed, their sense of urgency and exasperation has been made clear today. In the event, however, owing to the skilled intervention of the local authority, a better solution was found. The school formed a federation with a successful partner, Westcliffe Primary, and that process is now benefiting both school communities. Ultimately, the local authority's skilled intervention has produced a better outcome for children and parents—the very people on whom we should all be focusing. That is the sort of best practice that should be applauded and learnt from, in the interests of children and parents everywhere. Of course we are pleased that the Government have acceded to our arguments, and have included academies in the “coasting arena” so that action can be taken when necessary.
We come to the 80 lines of amendment 8, which was inserted to recognise that academies—as we already know—can also fail or be coasting and need improvement. Academy governance is a mess. There are 5,000-plus academies and 5,000-plus funding agreements. The private contract, as opposed to public law, cannot work for such a large number. It is a bureaucratic nightmare.

It baffles me that this Bill insists on treating schools differently depending on what type of school structure they have. If Ministers truly believe that no parent should have to put up with their child spending a single day in a failing school—to be fair, they have reiterated that today, and we agree wholeheartedly with them on it—and that leadership and governance should be replaced immediately, I simply cannot fathom why that would not apply to failing academies, too. Rather than double standards for pupils, there needs to be robust, purposeful action taken over any school that should be doing better.

In conclusion, let me remind Members of the words of Sir Keith Joseph, one of the Secretary of State’s illustrious predecessors, in introducing his 1984 Green Paper:

“Parents care about their children’s progress—how they develop and what they learn. They share the general desire for higher standards of education. We have not yet... allowed parents sufficient scope for discharging their unique responsibilities. Our education system is poorer for this. The Government now intends—while fully respecting the responsibilities of local education authorities—to extend its policies for raising standards in schools by enabling parents to improve the work of the schools.”

This is an old-fashioned one nation Tory who respected the importance and the role of parents.

How times have changed when it is now a Labour Opposition who have to remind a Conservative Government of the need to respect parents and recognise the role of local government in providing oversight and accountability. Amendment 8 goes a tiny way towards bringing improvement by stating what funding agreements should say—whether they say or do not—about Government action when a school causes concern. Much more robust legislation is required, and the Minister might like to indicate whether it is true that the Government’s much touted next White Paper will ideologically academise the rest of the school estate. If so, will there be further action when a school causes concern. Much more robust action taken when either are failing or coasting. Academies that are failing should have no more rights than maintained schools when either are failing or coasting. Academies that are failing should have no more rights than maintained schools that are failing. There should be a level playing field for children, parents and communities, whatever the structure of the school. Labour believes that a partnership with parents is key to a strong education system, which is why we continue to argue that when their child’s school is to academise or the academy’s sponsor is to be changed, parents should be consulted.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 6 agreed to.

After Clause 12

Amendment (a) proposed to Lords amendment 7.

Question put, That the amendment be made.


Division No. 196] [7.6 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Kevin
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinisop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brady, sh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julian
Cooper, Rosie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil

Crausby, Mr David
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danzuck, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geralyn
De Piero, Gloria
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mr Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollick, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Kan, Mr Ali
Kavanagh, rh Alan
Kaufman, Mrs Betty
Kavanagh, Dr Roderick
Keates, John
Kelly, Henry
Kemel, Mrs Canan
Kell, Paul
Kemp, Mrs Uta
Kemp, Peter
Kemp, Ben
Kemp, Mr Peter
Kempen, Dr Hans
Kendall, Liz
Kennock, Stephen
Kerry, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shahana
Malhotra, Seema
Marrs, Rob
Marsden, rh Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, Dr Alan
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Morden, Jessica
Morris, Grahame M.
Muholland, Greg
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Save, rh Mr Michael
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Mr Mark
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Sue Hayman and
Vicky Foxcroft

**NOES**

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brooksbank, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clevery, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djohngly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dowley, Rhys
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Elliott, Tom
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Ephicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Eve, Mr Michael
Fabricant, Michael
Falloon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francisco, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garner, rh Sir Edward
Garner, Mark
Gaule, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hans, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, rh Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernad
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Business without Debate

ESTIMATES

 הרהויה וצלחת

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Infrastructure Planning

That the draft Infrastructure Planning (Onshore Wind Generating Stations) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 14 January, be approved.

Criminal Law

That the Andrey Lugovoy and Dmitri Kovtun Freezing Order 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 67), dated 22 January 2016, a copy of which was laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.

Companies

That the draft Register of People with Significant Control Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 January, be approved.

Limited Liability Partnerships

That the draft Limited Liability Partnerships (Register of People with Significant Control) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 January, be approved. --- (Stephen Barclay.)

Question agreed to.

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

Road Traffic

That the draft Passenger and Goods Vehicles (Tachographs) (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 12 January, be approved. --- (Stephen Barclay.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 24 February (Standing Order No. 41A).

Estimates

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 145(3)).

That this House agrees with the Report of the Liaison Committee of 10 February:

(1) That a day not later than 18 March be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2015-16:

Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, insofar as it relates to Department of Health, insofar as it relates to end of life care.

(2) That a further day not later than 18 March be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2015-16:
Foreign & Commonwealth Office, insofar as it relates to the Spending Review 2015; and
Home Office, insofar as it relates to reform of the police funding formula.—(Stephen Barclay.)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 24 February (Standing Order No. 41A).

HIGH SPEED RAIL (LONDON – WEST MIDLANDS) BILL

Ordered,
That the High Speed Rail (London – West Midlands) Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.—(Stephen Barclay.)

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO INDUSTRY

Ordered,
That the Motion in the name of Secretary Sajid Javid relating to Financial Assistance to Industry shall be treated as if it related to an instrument subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instrument be approved.—(Stephen Barclay.)

PETITION

Election of FIFA President

7.23 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): The petition to the House of Commons from a resident of the UK states:

The petition of a resident of the UK, shows that in August 2009, Sheikh Salman, then Bahrain Football Association (Bahrain FA) President, was accused of using FIFA-financed sports development budgets to fund his unsuccessful campaign for the FIFA Executive Committee election; and that in a leaked letter received by the Al Bilad newspaper it was claimed that Sheikh Salman had spent upwards of 855,000 dinars (£1.6 million GBP) on his campaign and that some of this money had come from FIFA-financed football development projects, in particular Goal 1 (intended to help fund a new Bahrain FA headquarters), and Goal 3 (intended to provide facilities for the development of youth and women's football); that after FIFA requested urgent information from the Bahrain FA regarding the misappropriation of funds Sheikh Salman did not comment until early September 2009, at which point he denied those claims, however the Bahrain FA did not dispute the contents of the leaked documents; also notes that prior to Sheikh Salman's election to the Presidency of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) in May 2013, details of the flights that the Football Federation of Kyrgyz Republic's (FFKR) delegation would be taking to and from Kuala Lumpur for the AFC vote were emailed to the private account of the 'IT manager' at the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), of which a close associate of Sheikh Salman was Head; that three days before the vote, requests for support for 53 projects for Kyrgyzstan football to the tune of millions of pounds were discussed although there seems to be no legitimate reason for the FFKR, part of FIFA, to be seeking funding from the OCA, part of the International Olympic Committee; notes that the FFKR approached the OCA again after the AFC election asking when they would receive payment for their projects, which gives strong grounds to suspect that the FFKR voted for Sheikh Salman because they believed they would receive significant financial support from the OCA (including that OCA officials appear to have met officials from the FFKR during the AFC vote in 2013); and believes that this is a fresh 'cash for votes' scandal which needs urgent investigation.

The petitioner therefore requests that the House of Commons urges the Government to confirm that it would not support bids from the English Football Association to host FIFA tournaments should Sheikh Salman be elected as President of FIFA on Friday 26 February 2016.

And the petitioner remains, etc. [P001673]
Waste Recycling: South Gloucestershire

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

7.27 pm

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): After the heady political events of the past few days, I wish to turn the House’s attention to a matter that is rather more local, but nevertheless of the utmost concern to residents in my local area. It is a matter that has the power to win or lose elections—a matter that, as I am sure the Minister knows, local councillors mess around with at their peril. I am, of course, talking about local waste collection and bins.

This is not the only occasion I have used an Adjournment debate to raise my concerns about waste collection services in my local area of South Gloucestershire. I am sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you will recall the memorable debate I had in the House on 30 June 2014, in which I raised constituents’ concerns regarding the introduction of a separate charge for green bin waste collection—dubbed the green bin tax—which was opposed by local Conservative councillors, but voted through by Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors. In that debate, the Minister was highly critical of the council for introducing what has been termed a stealth tax and imposing extra charges on residents for services that, if we are honest, should quite simply be paid for by council tax.

Together with my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall)—he is in his place and will contribute to the debate later—who had not yet been elected to this place, I collected more than 4,000 signatures on a petition opposing the introduction of the green bin tax. Local Conservatives also pledged in their manifesto to scrap the charge over the next council term. It is therefore welcome that, only last week, local Conservative councillors signalled their first move towards removing the green bin charge, reducing it by £6, with the aim of phasing it out over four years. The Conservative-controlled council was elected on a mandate to do that, and I expect it to meet its manifesto commitment.

That just goes to show that debates such as this have the power to sway local opinion and to lead to a sea change in local policy. It is with that optimism in mind that I wish to speak about the potential changes to waste recycling in South Gloucestershire. South Gloucestershire is soon to face its greatest shake-up in waste recycling services in over a decade. As the local MP—I should probably declare my interest in that I am also a South Gloucestershire council tax payer and user of its waste recycling services—I wish to use this debate to ensure that my constituents’ concerns about this massive change are properly represented.

The changes can be broken down into two components. The first is the welcome introduction of weekly recycling for all recyclable materials. Currently, we have a system where metals, glass and cartons are collected in a 55-litre green box every two weeks, alternating with the collection of paper, plastics and cardboard in three separate 60-litre bags. It is a messy, overly complicated system which, as any resident will know, clutters up the house and, once the boxes are emptied, they risk getting blown across the streets. Thankfully, that will end, to be replaced with the weekly collection of a single recycling box with dividers to separate the various recyclable materials. So far so good: residents will now have the chance to recycle all their materials weekly, rather than having to wait for them to be collected every two weeks. But the second change will be far less welcome, as the black bin, which will still be collected every fortnight, is set to be reduced in size from 240 litres to 140 litres.

The council’s reasoning for making these changes is clear. As a council, South Gloucestershire needs to do more to increase its recycling and composting rates, which have fallen from 55.1% in 2010 to 47.5% in 2015—though it would be interesting to know to what extent the introduction of a green bin charge has proved counter-productive in causing fewer people to recycle green waste. The council’s research shows that of the 44,868 tonnes of black bin waste that was collected last year, 52% could have been recycled. Given that any rubbish that goes into the black bin is sent to landfill, costing the council approximately £80 a tonne, we are literally throwing away council tax payers’ money. In 2014-15, £4.5 million was spent on disposing of black bin waste—23% of the council’s total waste budget. If the recyclable material in the black bins had been recycled, the council would have saved an extra £3 million—in effect, £11 for every man, woman and child in South Gloucestershire. In making this change, the council will be following Bristol City Council and Bath and North East Somerset Council in making similar reductions in their black bin size.

While the rationale behind the reduction in size of the black bins is clear, I nevertheless feel that many residents will struggle with the change. Personally—I must put my personal thoughts on record—I feel that the reduction in the size of the black bin from 240 litres to 140 litres is a reduction too far. Other councils with far higher recycling rates have not reduced their black bin size by as much. South Oxfordshire District Council, which has a 67.3% recycling rate, has a black bin size of 180 litres, and Vale of White Horse District Council, with a 65.6% recycling rate, has the same bin size. Again personally, I believe that the change to weekly recycling will do enough to drive up recycling rates alone without penalising residents with the introduction of vastly smaller black bins, which, after all, have a significant initial capital cost.

Although my hon. Friend and I welcome the weekly recycling, we have written to the leader of the council, Matthew Riddle, setting out our concerns over the proposed changes and suggesting amendments that could be made to the future of waste services in South Gloucestershire. In the letter, we have called for three key amendments to the council’s waste policy. First, there should be no reduction in the overall capacity of the waste services for householders. Indeed, we wish to make the case that South Gloucestershire Council should use the opportunity of this change to increase the amount of waste that it collects from residents, giving far greater value for money. To do this, we are calling for the council to give an unlimited number of the new recycling boxes to residents who request them. It will be up to local people to request the number they would like, but there should be no cap, so that people will be able to recycle as much as possible without restraint in capacity. A reduction in the size of the black bin—or the landfill bin, to give it its proper name—should be accompanied by a clear understanding that people will be given the chance to recycle more and to do so more often.


Secondly, we have been contacted by many families with young children who are concerned that the change will impact heavily on them. I know exactly how they feel, as I am the father of an 18-month-old girl, and my wife is expecting our second child in less than a month—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you. Indeed, I feel their pain, as I am sure does the Minister, given that he has a young toddler roughly the same age as mine. Therefore, to help those families who are struggling and overloaded with nappies and other waste that no one would ever consider fit to be recycled, I am calling for the establishment of a free universal nappy collection service for any family that requests it.

Thirdly, the new single recycling box will, in all honesty, make things a lot easier for my constituents, but I would prefer a single recycling wheeble bin, which is what has been adopted by many other councils. However, if a single recycling box is to be adopted, elderly, vulnerable and disabled people may be unable to carry a heavy box and their needs must be taken into consideration. That could include allowing them either to keep a larger bin or to have some form of adaptive device that would allow the recycling box to be wheeled in place for collection.

I hope that my and my hon. Friend’s requests will be considered seriously by the council when it makes its decision. This change will be significant for many residents and needs to be handled sensitively. I hope that my proposals do precisely that, and that they will help to create a better and more efficient way to recycle waste in South Gloucestershire.

7.36 pm

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): I am grateful to be called to speak in a debate that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) has said, the record books may not show to be as animated as others held this week. Nevertheless, the issue is still important to people in South Gloucestershire. I thank my hon. Friend both for securing this debate and for his tireless work and commitment on the issue over the years I have known him.

Before being elected to this place, I made the case as strongly as possible, alongside local Conservative councillors and my hon. Friend, that recycling services should be enhanced and protected, so the issue is close to my heart. In that vein, I want to comment on South Gloucestershire’s draft waste strategy.

I welcome the council’s proposed additional measures to provide the means for local people to reuse, repair and refurbish items from their homes, as well as the council’s affirmation of its confidence in the success of the Thornbury Revive shop and its commitment to consider avenues to expand that service.

The draft waste strategy document produced by South Gloucestershire Council suggests that bulky waste is a significant contributor to waste going from our area to landfill. It states that the reuse strategy “aims to reduce landfill to below ten percent by addressing large bulky waste material.”

Given that bulky waste is an identified significant contributor to landfill, I welcome the potential savings to South Gloucestershire that would result from a reduction in such waste going to landfill. That will help the council significantly in its aim to reduce the amount spent on landfill tax. In fact, the Thornbury Revive shop’s success in reusing more than 160 tonnes of material itself represents a reduction in that liability of more than £13,500. It is clear, therefore, that that approach has real potential to achieve an important part of the 5% reduction target for the total waste going to landfill.

I also welcome the council’s proposed introduction of a weekly food waste recycling scheme. On recycling rates, it is clear that the majority of the best performing authorities provide a weekly food or compostable collection service. The proposed weekly collection of residents’ household recyclable waste is also welcome, because it will simplify the current service of three bags and one container.

My hon. Friend and I anticipate that the proposed changes in recycling services will help to reduce the amount of money South Gloucestershire spends on sending waste to landfill. They will reduce the burden of paying £80 per tonne of waste sent to landfill while at the same time increase income through increased recycling revenue. I urge South Gloucestershire Council, as we have done in our letter, to use the total amounts of money generated under the proposals to continue to phase out the green bin tax. I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the £6 reduction in the green bin charge as a first step to the council’s fulfilling its manifesto pledge, and I urge the council to use the extra funding generated by the changes to deliver that pledge fully.

Although I welcome the proposed changes to recycling services, the proposal to reduce residents’ standard black bin, or landfill bin, capacity from 240 litres to 140 litres is of considerable concern. The dramatic reduction in capacity could put real pressure on families across South Gloucestershire, leaving some families unable to adapt. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs compiled waste statistics from our 16 nearest neighbour authorities. Of those, the nine authorities with a higher recycling rate than ours—from 48% to more than 60%—have a black bin capacity larger than the 140 litres proposed by South Gloucestershire Council. The only exception is Bath and North East Somerset Council, which provides reusable bags.

Among the authorities with higher rates of recycling, there is an almost even split between those that offer a reduced bin size of 180 litres and those that offer a 240-litre bin. The only authority with a 140-litre bin, Northumberland, has shown a rate of below 40%, which is 7.9% lower than that in South Gloucestershire. In short, reducing the size of the black bin to 140 litres does not result in a directly proportionate increase in recycling. The widespread replacement of bins, in addition to the new recycling bins, would prove costly to local taxpayers with little absolute evidence that it would help families or the council achieve the stated aims of the strategy.

The proposed changes will affect residents across the area. I hope that the suggestions that my hon. Friend and I have made will help to inform the best possible service for local people across South Gloucestershire.

7.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) and for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) for bringing this important subject forward for
That all adds cost. Different types of anaerobic digester consuming waste. There are different sizes and colours of bin, different types of truck, different types of recycling system and different types of food waste—plastic, paper, metal and glass—are separated by dividers; and the question of whether elderly people will be able to move the recycling boxes.

Those are good points to raise, particularly as we are coming to the great moment of “Clean for the Queen”. It is a great ambition to create, for the Queen’s 90th birthday, that green and pleasant land of which Blake spoke. In Britain, we should take particular pride in that, because Britain has been famous for a long time for its neatness. Tourists who come here have long respected this country for being a tidy place. The steps that South Gloucestershire is taking show that continued commitment.

The points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate are particularly important because this country has more than 300 recycling systems. It is a little bit absurd. As we go from council to council, we see that some collect waste commingled, some—about 40—separate food waste, and about another 260 do not. There are different sizes and colours of bin, different types of truck, different types of recycling system and different types of anaerobic digester consuming waste. That all adds cost.

Stephen Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Rubbish!

Rory Stewart: It is indeed. In London alone, we could probably save £19 million a year if we had a single standard recycling system. Across the country as a whole, the savings would be extraordinary. We spend more than £3 billion a year simply collecting waste. If we had a single, harmonised system across the country, we could drive up recycling rates, massively reduce the cost for ratepayers and achieve extraordinary things for the environment and for councils themselves. South Gloucestershire Council is therefore a good example on which to focus.

That South Gloucestershire example is also a good illustration of some of the problems involved in realising such a dream. The council has taken some fantastic steps. It has separated the waste, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood has pointed out, means we can get out the value. If we commingle the waste—putting the glass, paper and card together in the same box—it can be a real problem, even with modern methods, to extract the glass as it goes through the system. We should be able to get much more value out of the paper or the glass, which can go back into the council and the rate payer, if we keep the waste separate.

The council has a good system for doing that in South Gloucestershire—a single box, with dividers to make separation easier.

The challenge, as my hon. Friend pointed out, is making sure that the system is comprehensible to the public and something to which the public can respond and relate. I therefore encourage South Gloucestershire Council to take on board the points made by my two hon. Friends, along with our congratulations on the direction in which they are going and on the national leadership it is showing.

It seems sensible, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood said, to look at the needs of the vulnerable and of large families. I believe that South Gloucestershire Council already takes into account the fact that if a family has six members, it may need a larger bin. The council may wish to show additional flexibility for exactly the kind of people mentioned by my hon. Friend.

I do not wish to talk simply about the negative aspects—both my hon. Friends made very good points—but to look at the positives. If South Gloucestershire Council gets this right, we will have a national model. Why do we need a national model? We need one because South Gloucestershire Council is recycling only about 47% of its waste at the moment, which is not quite good enough. Wales, which has a pretty challenging geography, is currently recycling about 53% of its waste. If Wales can do it, there is no reason why England cannot do it as well. There are no profound cultural differences there.

We are committed to getting to a recycling target of 50% across the country by 2020. We will get there by following the lead of places such as South Gloucestershire. I therefore urge my hon. Friends to work with the council to reach out to surrounding councils in Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and the south-west and try to encourage harmonisation. That can be done. Manchester has now got 10 councils together to come up with a single recycling system. It is investing hundreds of millions of pounds over the next 25 years to make that work.

South Gloucestershire Council could be showing exactly that lead for the country—and, my goodness, we need it. The reason we need it is that we live in a world in which such resources are under pressure. We have talked about separating food waste. We are currently consuming 70% of the world’s water just on producing the food eaten by the current population. The average household in Britain wastes £65 a month by throwing away food that does not need to be thrown away. We are consuming and depleting resources—oil, precious minerals—that could be recycled and used again. We are creating a lot of unnecessary carbon by creating materials that could be recycled. We put into landfill 50% of the stuff that does not need to go into landfill, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood pointed out.

If we can get this right, Britain can be a national example, our great environmental industries can take off, we can export some of these skills and we can show the world that we are an environmental leader. We can also make British jobs and generate energy out of it, we can have a much better circular economy and it will be good for our production. Thanks to the fantastic contributions from my hon. Friends, the South Gloucestershire example could be a very important part of such a solution.

Question put and agreed to.
Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): What discussions has he had with his ministerial colleagues on proposals for a Cardiff city deal.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Stephen Crabb): The Cardiff city deal represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to raise growth levels right across the region, securing Cardiff’s position as one of the best capital cities in Europe and a fantastic place in which to do business. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and I met leaders from the Cardiff capital region to discuss the city deal and to ensure that progress and momentum are being maintained.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) has long championed the city deal to help deliver even greater success for Cardiff and Wales, but for it to succeed everyone must be as committed to delivering for Cardiff as he and the Secretary of State so clearly are. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the Welsh Assembly Government’s commitment to this city deal and particularly their commitment to funding it?

Stephen Crabb: First, though, let me put on record our congratulations to him and his wife, Clare, as it is a few days after the birth of their second child. It is wonderful to see him taking a break from paternity leave to stand here today championing the interests of his constituents in Cardiff. He is absolutely right on two counts. The first is on the success of bringing the Aston Martin deal to Wales, which is a great example of the Welsh and the UK Governments working together in a true team Wales approach. The second is on the importance of business and the fact that it is right at the heart not just of helping to create the city deal vision, but of delivering it as well.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): Let me pass on my congratulations to the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams). I also congratulate the workforce in the St Athan area—in the seat of the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns)—and the Welsh Labour Government on their support for that project, the Cardiff city deal and the Swansea city deal. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the support will be there for Cardiff and for the proposal by Terry Matthews for an “internet coast” that links Swansea and west Wales as well, as that is where we will drive the jobs into Wales?

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Is it not the case that Aston Martin moved to St Athan in the Greater Cardiff region partly because of the success of organisations such as Superfast Cymru, which is delivering fast broadband, and particularly because of the skills that now exist in south Wales?
Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend, who has a great love for and knowledge of Wales, is right. The most important thing for securing big inward investment projects such as Airbus, or the continued inward investment of companies such as Aston Martin, is the excellence of the skills and the workforce that we have now in Wales. We are not complacent about that. There is more progress that could be achieved, but the reason that such companies choose Wales over locations all round the world is the quality of the skills of the workforce, the quality of the infrastructure and the UK Government’s commitment to creating the best environment for economic growth.

Employment Levels

2. Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of employment in Wales.

7. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of employment in Wales; and if he will make a statement.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Now that it is official Government policy to support membership of the European Union in the referendum, will the Minister and the Secretary of State produce a report that shows the benefit of the European Union to jobs and investment in Wales?

Alun Cairns: Our position is clear. The Government support the deal that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has negotiated. Of course, Europe is important to our exporters and businesses, but it is also important because of the money repatriated from Europe to Wales and the United Kingdom through cohesion funding.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): As Aberystwyth’s MP, I reiterate the comments of the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti). If we are serious about creating more jobs, and we are, that means real investment in real infrastructure. Why, then, has the Government’s mobile infrastructure project been such a failure and delivered so little for rural Wales?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman raises this issue persistently. As a result of representations from him and others, I met Openreach earlier this week, as well as Broadband Delivery UK. I have plans to meet the mobile operators shortly to discuss what more can be done to improve the mobile infrastructure. With the 4G auction, at least 95% coverage will be gained in Wales. That contrasts significantly with the 3G auction and the low percentage that Wales was left with last time.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating my constituent, Mr Sean Taylor, on the further expansion of his company, Zip World? In four years this company has gone from no staff to 220 staff, revitalising the economy of rural north-west Wales, to the benefit of employment and diversification of the local economy.

Alun Cairns: Many Members will appreciate the difficulties that zip wires can present, but I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Who is a true champion of zip wires and the success and diversification that they bring not only to his own constituency, but to Arfon. We are keen to see the further support and diversification of that business in his area.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Following the excellent news about Aston Martin, I pay tribute to that company, to our dynamic pro-business Welsh Labour Government and to everyone who was involved in securing the deal. As we are discussing trends in employment, and with around 200,000 jobs in Wales dependent on our EU membership, what does the Minister think would happen to trends in employment if we were daft enough to leave the EU?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for recognising the efforts that the UK Government have made to attract investment, particularly with the major Aston Martin investment in my constituency. I think those comments should be underlined. Of course, the Government do not plan to leave the European Union; the Prime Minister has made the case, having negotiated a strong deal, and we are confident that the British people will support that when the referendum comes.
Welsh Economy

3. William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of steps taken to rebalance the economy in Wales. [903621]

5. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of steps taken to rebalance the economy in Wales. [903624]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Stephen Crabb): This Government know that supporting our manufacturing industry is vital for rebalancing the economy. Despite challenging global conditions, we have seen 12,000 new manufacturing jobs created by businesses in Wales since 2010, reversing the decline we saw under the previous Labour Government.

William Wragg: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. How will small businesses in my constituency and in the north-west of England be able to benefit from the economic recovery in north Wales?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the strength of the economic recovery in north Wales. When I travel around Wales, I see that much of what is innovative and exciting is happening in north Wales. We are clear that the economy of north Wales is integrated in a single entity with the economy of north-west England, so there are lots of opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses on both sides of the border to benefit from the emerging northern powerhouse vision. I met the North Wales Business Council earlier this month and, like businesses across north Wales, it is calling out to be part of the northern powerhouse.

Craig Tracey: Does the Secretary of State agree that the success of the manufacturing industry in Wales, and across the rest of the UK, reflects a growing global demand for our products and is further evidence of the success of the Government’s ambitious Exporting is GREAT campaign?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; there is enormous and growing global demand for high-quality products manufactured in Wales. The Government have set ourselves really ambitious targets for increasing the level of UK exports, and I am clear that I want to see Welsh business sharing in that export surge. That is why UK Trade & Investment’s Exporting is GREAT roadshow truck will be in Deeside in north Wales tomorrow, explaining to small businesses there what export opportunities there are around the world.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): One way to rebalance the economy is to decentralise enterprise and services. Therefore, why are the Government closing tax offices in peripheral areas of Wales, given the impact that has on the economy? They talk about decentralisation, but they centralise services when they adopt on this issue. If she wants to talk about what has happened to steel jobs under Conservative and Labour Governments, I am happy to do that, and we can talk about the decline in steel jobs on the watch of previous Labour Governments. I am much more interested in getting answers now to the global storm facing the steel industry. This Government have taken a lead in Europe in changing procurement rules and arguing for protection growth in private sector jobs in Wales over the past five years far outweighs any reductions we have seen in public sector employment.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Partial income tax powers are of course a welcome step in helping the UK rebalance geographically, but it is vital that those powers are accompanied by a fiscal framework that genuinely preserves non-detriment to Wales. Given the Scottish Government’s successful struggle to achieve a no-detriment agreement, what specific representations has the Secretary of State received from the Welsh Government on their chosen deduction method, and what is his chosen deduction method? Is it not the case that partial income tax powers make it more difficult to achieve genuine non-detriment?

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman is right about the need to get the details right—we have just seen a very prolonged negotiation on the Scottish fiscal framework—but that is further down the line. We still have an ongoing discussion with the Welsh Government. They want to avoid taking on any income tax powers whatsoever. They want to avoid the additional fiscal responsibility that that would entail. They are running from having a fuller financial accountability that we believe is really important for Welsh democracy.
measures against Chinese dumping. We are making sure that the steel industry in Wales has the best possible chance of a sustainable and profitable future.

Nia Griffith: The Government also have a key role in commissioning large infrastructure projects, which can boost manufacturing and rebalance the economy. Manufacturers across Wales, who are gearing up in earnest to supply the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, share my deep concern that the Government are now planning a lengthy review, which could scupper the project altogether. Will the Secretary of State now give us an unequivocal guarantee that this vital project will not be sunk by his Government?

Stephen Crabb: I notice that the shadow Secretary of State did not stand up and welcome what we saw yesterday—Her Majesty the Queen naming and opening the new Elizabeth Crossrail line, which, by the way, uses 50,000 tonnes of steel made in Wales by Celsa Steel. The hon. Lady should be absolutely welcoming that as a good example of how UK infrastructure investment can drive growth in the steel industry. On the tidal lagoon review, the chief executive of the Swansea tidal lagoon has welcomed it himself. He welcomes the fact that we are looking into this and exploring all options to see whether the project can be financially viable.

Mr Speaker: We are all better informed, albeit at some length.

13. [903632] John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does the Minister share my view that a prime mover behind rebalancing the economy is the sense of fairness? Does he agree that the action taken by the Government in freeing generations of people in constituencies throughout Wales is about making the best use of their talents? [Interruption.] Mr Speaker: No, it will do for today—as long as the Secretary of State heard. But courtesy dictates.

Stephen Crabb: I did not hear the full question, but what I did hear was a really important point about fairness when it comes to rebalancing the economy. Unlike previous Labour Governments, who stood by while the economy of the United Kingdom became hopelessly imbalanced towards London and the south-east, we do not think that is good enough. We think that hopelessly imbalanced towards London and the south-east, while the economy of the United Kingdom became

Dr Fox: Devolving air passenger duty will create a market distortion favouring a state-owned airport against a private one. It will damage the economic viability of Bristol airport and have consequential detrimental effects in the south-west. When my right hon. Friend discusses this with the Chancellor, will he gently reflect on the fact that, had our colleagues not made such great gains in the south-west, there would not be a majority Conservative Government?

Stephen Crabb: I am sure that my right hon. Friend, like me, welcomes the fact that the Government are cutting APD in all parts of the UK. However, let us be clear: I want Cardiff airport to be a success story, but I also recognise that there are serious concerns about the effect APD devolution might have on competition issues in relation to Bristol airport.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that north Wales’s local airports are in Liverpool and Manchester? Will he pull his finger out and have meetings to improve connectivity to Manchester airport by rail from north Wales?

Stephen Crabb: I am very aware of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises. I recently met the north Wales business council precisely to talk about the importance of a rail link from north Wales into Manchester airport. He makes an important point that we are very mindful of.

Workless Households

6. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in the proportion of households in Wales which are workless. [903625]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Wales is getting back to work. There are 58,000 fewer workless households in Wales since 2010. Our welfare reforms are benefiting the people of Wales, helping them into jobs that will provide a regular wage for themselves and their families.

Bob Blackman: Does my hon. Friend agree that the far-reaching benefit changes and reforms of the welfare state are encouraging people to get back to work and have the dignity of earning a living rather than living a life on benefits?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The unemployment rate in Wales has fallen by more than that in any part of the UK over the last quarter. Welfare reform is key to that. We are determined to deliver a low welfare, low tax, high wage economy.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): The Institute for Fiscal Studies warned this month that universal credit will tend to weaken the incentive for single parents to be in work. What assessment have the Government made of the effect that rolling out universal credit will have on the number of workless households in Wales?
Alun Cairns: Welfare reform needs to be taken in its totality. It is about incentivising work but also about increasing wages and lowering taxes. I would hope that the hon. Lady would reflect on the positive nature of welfare reform in turning around communities, families and society.

Large Infrastructure Projects

8. David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with stakeholders in Wales on future investment in large infrastructure projects in north Wales. [903627]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Secretary of State and I regularly meet stakeholders to discuss the Government’s plans to deliver improvements in infrastructure across the whole of Wales. For instance, next week the Secretary of State will meet Hitachi to discuss its proposals for a new nuclear power station at Wylfa in more detail.

David Rutley: Can my hon. Friend confirm that bringing HS2 to Crewe six years early, as part of the Government’s northern powerhouse, will directly benefit the people of north Wales and spur more economic development programmes in Wales, as well as in north-west England and Cheshire more generally?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. He highlights the fact that the HS2 project is truly a national scheme. The Crewe hub offers significant potential to north Wales and to the northern powerhouse. I recently met the North Wales-Mersey Dee alliance rail taskforce, which also recognises the potential of north Wales for the northern powerhouse and the northern powerhouse for north Wales.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Much is rightly made of trends in employment in Wales, but average full-time workers’ pay in my constituency has dropped by 12% in the past two years. What is the Secretary of State doing to bring infrastructure projects, along with science and technology salaries, to Llanbedr and Trawsfynydd in Dwyfor Meirionnydd?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady is naturally a true champion not only of her own constituency but the whole of north Wales. She will welcome the significant investment in the prison in Wrexham and the £20 billion investment that Wylfa Newydd will bring. She has also shown interest in the modular nuclear projects at Trawsfynydd. I recently met the leader of Gwynedd Council to discuss the prospects that could result from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s announcement in the Budget making £250 million available for this scheme.

Macur Review

9. Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): When he expects the report of the Macur review to be published. [903628]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Stephen Crabb): Lady Justice Macur’s report is being considered as a matter of urgency with a view to publication as soon as possible.

Ann Clwyd: Eight young boys in my constituency were abused in the 1980s. They have waited all this time for some conclusions. It is ridiculous that in the past two months Government Departments have been sitting on Lady Macur’s report. What is going on? I understand that redactions are taking place. What confidence can we have that when the report is eventually published it is a true report without interference from Government?

Stephen Crabb: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. We are discussing something incredibly serious and sensitive. Let me put on record my thanks to her for the tireless work that she has put in over the years to fight for justice for those who have suffered horrendous abuse. We are talking about some of the most shameful episodes in the history of the nation of Wales.

We have the report, and it is being looked at by the Crown Prosecution Service, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the police. Lady Justice Macur recommended to the Government that certain redactions might need to be made. The commitment that I give to the right hon. Lady and the House today is that we will make redactions only where they are absolutely necessary, and we will provide a full explanation of why we are making those redactions. We owe that to the victims.

12. [903631] Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Does the Secretary of State agree that there is concern about attention in the report to the language issue? The only attention that was given to the language issue in the Waterhouse report was to say that the children swore a great deal, as well they might have.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman is getting into a level of detail about the matter that we can perhaps discuss outside this place on another occasion. Perhaps he and I could meet to talk about that.

Hywel Williams: The Wales Council for Voluntary Action criminal records unit, which provides free disclosure and barring checks for the third sector, will close on 31 May. The last paper application will be accepted this Friday. The WCVA has provided a bilingual service, which will cease on Friday. Does the Secretary of State share my concern about that cut?

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman knows that I want the Welsh language to flourish and be used on a day-to-day basis. I am not familiar with the case that he has raised, but if he wants to drop me a note, I will make sure that it is looked into fully.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [903644] Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 24 February.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): The House will be aware of the dreadful accident that occurred at Didcot power station yesterday afternoon, in which one person died and three are missing. I know that the whole House will join me in sending our condolences to the family and friends of the victim and our best wishes
to those who are still missing or injured. I pay tribute to the quick and incredibly brave actions of our emergency services, who dealt with the incident with typical professionalism. The Health and Safety Executive will carry out a full investigation to find out what led to the tragedy.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others and in addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Michelle Donelan: I would like to associate myself and the people of Wiltshire with the Prime Minister’s sentiments about the occurrence in Didcot.

Wiltshire has successfully integrated a number of Syrian refugees, including babies and children, who might otherwise have frozen or starved to death in the camps. However, there has been a serious delay by the Home Office, despite Wiltshire Council’s claims to have tried to introduce more refugees into the area. Will the Prime Minister tell us what more he can do on the matter? Will he look into it? Will he also outline what we can do to fulfil our moral duty to those desperate people?

The Prime Minister: Let me pay tribute to Wiltshire Council and to the many councils up and down our country that have done a magnificent job of integrating and taking in Syrian refugees and their families, finding them homes, finding them schools and, I hope, in time, finding them jobs, too. If we look at what has happened across Europe with the relocation and resettlement programme, we see that Britain has done far better than any other country. We said 1,000 by Christmas, and we have delivered 1,000 by Christmas.

My hon. Friend asked what more we can do. First of all, I will make sure that she can meet the Home Office to talk about how we can make sure the system works well. We will continue to invest in the Syrian refugee camps, not least with the £11 billion that we raised at the landmark London conference. We will continue to do what we can to deliver the 20,000 Syrian refugees we said we would take into our country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I want to echo the Prime Minister’s tribute to all the emergency services in dealing with the major incident in Didcot. Our thoughts are with the families of the person who died and those who are missing or injured. We rely on our emergency services and we should make sure they are always there for all of us.

The NHS staff survey published yesterday shows that nine out of 10 junior doctors already work extra hours beyond their normal contract. The survey also showed falling morale among that vital group of staff. What does the Prime Minister think the Health Secretary’s veto of a deal and the imposition of a contract will do to their morale?

The Prime Minister: First, the Health Secretary did not veto a deal. For four years we have had discussions about how important it is to have an NHS that works on a more seven-day basis. Let me pay tribute to the fact that so many in the NHS work so hard already at the weekends, but what matters is making sure we can have a genuine seven-day NHS.

What I would say to junior doctors is that no junior doctor working legal hours will receive a pay cut. This contract will not impose longer hours. In fact, it has tougher safeguards to make sure it reduces the hours that are worked. We are not seeking to save money from the new contract. Nights, Saturday evenings and Sundays continue to attract unsocial hours payments. This is a good deal from a Government putting £10 billion more into our NHS.

Jeremy Corbyn: This dispute with the junior doctors has been on the basis of misrepresented research about weekend mortality. I will read the Prime Minister what the researchers themselves say:

“It is not possible to ascertain the extent to which these excess deaths may be preventable; to assume that they are avoidable would be rash and misleading.”

Are the Prime Minister and his Health Secretary being “rash and misleading” with these figures?

The Prime Minister: Let me agree with the right hon. Gentleman about something, which is that this dispute has been plagued by scaremongering and inaccurate statistics. The British Medical Association, in its first intervention, said that this was a 30% pay cut. That was completely untrue. In fact, it was so untrue that it had to take its pay calculator off its website, and it never put it back up again.

Let me answer very directly the question about excess deaths. The 6,000 figure for excess deaths was based on a question asked by the Health Secretary of Sir Bruce Keogh, the medical director of the NHS. Now that we have had time to go into these figures in more detail, I can tell the House this: the Health Secretary was indeed guilty—he was guilty of an understatement. The true figure for excess deaths at the weekend are 11,000, not 6,000. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will now withdraw his totally unjustified attack on the Health Secretary. Will he withdraw it, now he knows the figures?

Jeremy Corbyn: It is just worth reflecting for one moment that there is no dispute with the junior doctors in Scotland or in Wales, because their Governments have had the sense to reach an agreement with the junior doctors. The Prime Minister must also be aware that the vast majority of the public in England are on the side of the junior doctors, not the Secretary of State.

The situation actually gets worse. A freedom of information request by the BBC today reveals that, when asked for the source of the Health Secretary’s statistics, civil servants in the Department of Health decided to “offer up the most bland statement possible, that would neither confirm nor contradict” the Health Secretary’s “statement.”

Is it not time that the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary actually apologise for what they have done and correct these statements, and indeed, while they are about it, reach an honourable settlement with the junior doctors?

The Prime Minister: I think the best that can be said is that the right hon. Gentleman wrote that question before he heard my answer. I have given the fullest possible description of how the figure of 6,000 excess
We have put £10 billion more into the NHS. At the last doctors contract. We are building a strong NHS for treating more patients, we have a settlement of the junior doctors contract. We are building a strong NHS for patients—that is what this is about.

Jeremy Corbyn: We all want a strong and successful NHS, but that will not be achieved by provoking industrial action, misrepresenting research or failing to get a grip on the cost of agency staff in the NHS, which now amounts to £4 billion. Indeed, the Prime Minister’s own local NHS trust has overspent on staffing costs by £11 million this year, yet has managed to spend £30 million on agency staff. Will the chair of the Oxford anti-austerity campaign be writing another letter to himself on behalf of his constituents, asking for the Health Secretary to intervene to support his local NHS?

The Prime Minister: I am very proud of the NHS in Oxfordshire and everyone who works in it. Having met the head of the Oxford Radcliffe trust recently, I know that he supports the move towards more seven-day services. That is absolutely vital.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Ask your mother!

The Prime Minister: Ask my mother? I know what my mother would say. She would look across the Dispatch Box and say, “Put on a proper suit, do up your tie and sing the national anthem.”

Jeremy Corbyn: If we are talking of motherly advice, my late mother would have said, “Stand up for the principle of a health service free at the point of use for everybody.” That is what she dedicated her life to, as did many of her generation.

We are more than three quarters of the way into this financial year. The NHS deficit is already £2.26 billion, and 53% of NHS trust finance directors say that the quality of care in their local area has worsened this year. What will the deficit be by the end of next month?

The Prime Minister: We will get deficits down because we are clamping down on the staffing agencies and expensive management consultants, and introducing better public procurement.

The right hon. Gentleman has to recognise that we said we would back the Simon Stevens plan, which meant at least £8 billion more going into the NHS, but we have put £10 billion more into the NHS. At the last election and subsequently, Labour has refused to back that extra money. My mother is as proud of the NHS as I am, and she would be pleased to know that in the NHS today, there are 1.9 million more people going to A&E, 1.6 million more operations, 10,700 more doctors and 11,800 more nurses. I think that if Nye Bevan were here today, he would want a seven-day NHS, because he knew that the NHS was for patients up and down our country.

Jeremy Corbyn: Nye Bevan would be turning in his grave if he could hear the Prime Minister’s attitude towards the NHS. He was a man with vision who wanted a health service for the good of all. I tell you, Mr Speaker, our health service is run by brilliant people—brilliant doctors, brilliant nurses and brilliant staff. I have a question for the Prime Minister from one of those brilliant doctors, whose name is Ashraf:

“As a doctor I know full well the stresses on the NHS and the shortcomings. We already have a 7 day emergency service. How does increasing elective work improve safety at the weekend? If a truly 7 day NHS is wanted, we need more nurses, admin staff, porters, radiographers, physios”—all the other vital workers. Will the Prime Minister today commit to publishing the Department of Health’s analysis of the real cost of introducing a seven-day NHS? Is he prepared to pay for it, rather than picking a fight with the junior doctors who want to deliver it?

The Prime Minister: What I think is not clear is whether or not Labour supports a seven-day NHS. We support a seven-day NHS and that is why we are putting in £10 billion, 10,000 more doctors, and 11,000 more nurses. Crucially, yes, that is why we are looking at the contracts in the NHS to ensure that it can work on more of a seven-day basis. The truth is that there are more hospitals today in our country, such as the Salford Royal in the north-west of England, that already operate on a seven-day basis within existing budgets. That is good, because they are using all the equipment on a seven-day basis, they are carrying out consultations seven days a week and they carry out operations seven days a week. That is good for the hospital, good for the staff working in it and, above all, good for patients. We do not just get ill Monday to Friday. I want a world-class NHS. We are funding a world-class NHS. We have world-class people working in our NHS and together we will build that seven-day NHS.

Q3. [903646] Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): With such a large number of schools in Brecon and Radnorshire facing the prospect of closure, what can my right hon. Friend do to encourage the Welsh Assembly to convert state schools into free schools and academies so that my constituents can benefit from the improvements to education that English pupils are seeing and so that we hopefully save these excellent schools from closure?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, education is devolved in Wales and the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly Government. I urge them to focus on how a good education depends not only on the finance, which is there because of the way that the Barnett formula works and because of the decisions we have taken about funding the NHS in England, but on high standards and the publication of league tables, so that people can
see how their children are doing. Crucially, it requires structural reforms—free schools, academies—introducing some diversity and competition in getting organisations that are passionate about education to provide state education. We want all the best organisations in there providing the best education for our children.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I begin by associating the Scottish National party with the comments made by the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labour party about the tragedy in Didcot? Our thoughts are with all those who have been affected.

Will the Prime Minister congratulate the Scottish Government and his own colleagues who secured a deal on financial arrangements for the next phase of Scottish devolution? The Treasury position initially endangered £7 billion of public funding in Scotland. At the beginning of this week, that was reduced to £3 billion and yesterday morning it was £2.5 billion. What changed the mind of the Treasury and helped it agree to a deal that will make Scotland no worse off?

The Prime Minister: Let me agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this is an excellent deal. It is an excellent deal for Scotland, but it is also an excellent deal for the United Kingdom. For those of us who want to keep the United Kingdom together, we have just demonstrated that we can have full-on devolution with a powerhouse Parliament and a fair fiscal settlement inside the United Kingdom, and that is something to be celebrated. Now we will move to a situation in which the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament will have to start talking about policies and decisions rather than processes. I am happy that the negotiations went as they did, I am happy that we have a good outcome, and I am happy that Lord Smith, who is responsible for so much of this work, put out a statement saying that this delivers Smith and the principles “in full”. No more grievance, no more fussing about process, no more arguments about the arrangements: now is the time to get on and govern.

Angus Robertson: We are indebted to Scotland’s Finance Secretary, John Swinney, and to First Minister Nicola Sturgeon for securing a no-detriment deal for Scotland. The Prime Minister is right that all parties will have to lay out their plans in advance of the May election, so will he answer this question? Is it true that in this time of austerity his party, the Conservative party, is planning tax cuts for higher earners in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: It will be Ruth Davidson, who is the only proper Opposition figure in Scotland, who will be sending out the plans. If someone in Scotland is worried about having a bit of a one-party state and a lack of accountability, and if they think that the Labour party in Scotland has lost its way, there is only one choice, and that is Ruth. I think there are opportunities to cut taxes, sharpen incentives and attract businesses and people into Scotland, and I am sure that Ruth will be making those arguments. As she does, and whatever she decides, she will have my full and unequivocal support.

Q5. [903648] Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): A recent survey undertaken by Blaby District Council showed that 96% of the 1,100 residents surveyed were satisfied with my council’s services. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the Conservative leader of the council, Terry Richardson, his councillor colleagues, and all the officers in Blaby District Council who, while making savings that are necessary, are continuing to deliver a first-class service to the residents of South Leicestershire?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in doing that, and he makes an important point. Yes, we had to make difficult spending decisions, not least over the past five years, but satisfaction with local government services actually went up. I think that proves a larger point, which is that we can reduce spending levels, find efficiencies, and provide better services at the same time.

Q2. [903645] Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): My constituent Frank Wason is on long-term sick leave due to severe depression, but he is no longer entitled to sick pay. He was turned down for employment and support allowance, and he cannot claim jobseeker’s allowance due to his job being kept open for him. Mr Wason cannot leave his highly skilled job as a chef due to the threat of punitive sanctions, leaving him with no income. Will the Prime Minister consider Mr Wason’s case specifically, as well as the wider issue of expecting people with mental health issues who are unable to work to live on fresh air?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to look at the individual case, because the way that our benefit system should work is clear: if someone is unable to work, they should with help could work, they should go on to employment and support allowance and the work-related activity group and get that help. If they are unable to work, they go on to the support group and get a higher amount of money that is not means tested or time limited. For people who have mental health issues and difficulties there is the new personal independence payment system, which can address some of those issues. Quite rightly for a generous and compassionate country, we have a benefit system that supports those who cannot work, while ensuring that those who can work are encouraged to do so.

Q6. [903649] Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is fantastic news that unemployment in my constituency has fallen by 62% since 2010, but I am committed to helping even more residents back into work as we work towards our target of full employment. That is why on 18 March I will be holding a community and jobs fair, bringing together employers and the voluntary sector, for residents to find out the many ways that they can get suitable employment and support from charities. I invite the Prime Minister to come along to that event and see for himself the resources that the residents of Erewash have.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I am sure I will be touring the country quite a lot in the weeks to come, and perhaps a visit to Erewash would be very worth while. I have visited her constituency before. We now have a much lower unemployment rate, and looking across Europe, our rate of just above 5% is one of the lowest in Europe. Even at that rate, there is still a lot more to do to match the jobs that are being created to the people who want to work, and jobs fairs, apprenticeships
and training programmes are absolutely essential so that we deliver on what we promised, which is full employment.

Q4. [903647] Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The Prime Minister likes to go on about the importance of returning sovereignty to this House. May I remind him that on 7 January we debated the women’s state pension and the fact that women are being discriminated against by the pace of the state pension increase. The House divided that day with 158 votes to zero, and it asked the Government to mitigate the effects of that measure. Why have the Government not respected the sovereignty of the vote of this Parliament?

The Prime Minister: First, I would argue very strongly that we are not discriminating against women. We are ensuring that there is an equal age of retirement, which is right. Women have been discriminated against in the pension system in the past, and the single-tier pension means that many more women will be retiring with a full pension. As they do so, they have the triple lock of knowing that pensions will always go up by wages, prices or 2.5%, whichever is the highest. That is why pensioner poverty is at a record low, and why pensioners know that they can live in security and dignity in our country.

Q7. [903650] Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): South Thanet lags behind much of the south-east across very many indices. I have launched a new body locally, the Ramsgate regeneration alliance, which brings together businesses and community groups. May I invite my right hon. Friend and the Minister responsibility for coastal communities to this gem on our doorstep to see for themselves what it could and indeed should be?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to put Ramsgate on my tour list for the coming months. We all remember the historic battle my hon. Friend fought in that constituency. We have set up the coastal communities fund and have a dedicated Minister in the Government to try to help coastal communities. I will make sure that officials from his Department meet the new alliance and the Ramsgate coastal community team to see what they can do to help.

Q8. [903651] Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): For two years, my constituents and I campaigned against the development of a luxury skyscraper. The local councillors listened and rejected the plans, but then the Conservative Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government called in the decision and overturned the wishes of the community, showing utter disrespect for local democracy. The Prime Minister preaches localism, but will he finally admit that his Government believe only in the devolution of blame for cuts, not the devolution of actual power to local communities?

The Prime Minister: We have a long-standing system not only for local planning but for being able to call in decisions. That system operated the whole time under the previous Labour Government. If anything, our local planning system is actually putting more power in the hands of local people, because once they have completed their local plan it is then much easier to say yes to developments that are within that plan and no to developments that are outside it.

Q9. [903652] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Last Friday, I made separate visits to three families, all of whom have a child suffering from acute mental health difficulties that the families felt had not been adequately assessed at the early stages by child and adolescent mental health services. Colleagues from across the Chamber will be all too familiar with such visits. I welcome the Prime Minister’s recent commitment to reform mental health provision for young people. Will he consider reviewing the provision of initial stage treatment and continue to be the champion for these vulnerable and brave children?

The Prime Minister: Let me thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right that children and young people’s mental health is a priority for the Government. I think we can all agree across this House that for many years this area has not had adequate attention or adequate investment. I would highlight in particular the problems of psychosis, sometimes caused by drug use. I would also raise the huge problem of eating disorders; we are seeing a rapid increase in the number of people suffering. We have gone on a long way in increasing the number of talking therapies. Something like 740,000 more people are accessing those therapies than when the Government came into office. We recognise that there is more to be done and that is why we are investing £1.4 billion in system-wide transformation across child and adolescent mental health services.

Q10. [903653] Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Last week, Scottish Power refused to attend an evidence session with the all-party parliamentary group on Scottish Power cashback mis-selling, where crucial new evidence was uncovered. As a former consumer litigator, I am utterly convinced that more than 2,000 of my constituents and more than 500,000 people in the UK are owed cashback from Scottish Power. Given that this is potentially a scandal of huge proportions, will the Prime Minister agree to meet me and the cross-party group to discuss how we can ensure that these ordinary hard-working people receive the cashback they were promised from Scottish Power?

The Prime Minister: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised this. It has been raised on previous occasions by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) and I know the cross-party group has done some very useful work. My understanding is that any alleged wrongdoing should be fully investigated. Ofgem can impose fines if it finds companies have breached their licence. I am very happy to arrange for a meeting between him and other members of the all-party group to discuss how we can ensure that these ordinary hard-working people receive the cashback they were promised from Scottish Power?

Q11. [903654] Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that with the NATO summit in Warsaw pending, the threat of expansionism from Putin’s Russia and the national security threat from Daesh, the Government are right to support putting 2% of our GDP towards defence? Is he not shocked at the failure of the Labour party to do likewise?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point—we face an insecure and unstable world, particularly given what Putin has done in the Ukraine and particularly
in view of what we see in Syria. That is why I think 2% spending on defence and making sure we renew our nuclear deterrent is the right answer.

To be fair to the Labour party, it has an answer. It is not going to spend 2% and it is not going to renew our Trident submarines, but it has come up with a really brilliant answer. They are bringing back as their spokesman and spin doctor Damian McBride. Six months ago, the Leader of the Opposition said: “We can win in 2020, but only if we spend the next five years building this movement and putting forward a vision for the new kind of politics: honest, kinder and more caring.”

Six months on, Damian McBride is back. That says it all. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues are calling for more; there will be more.

Q12. [903655] Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Last week, together with several of my hon. Friends, I visited Palestine, where we went to the home of Nora and her family, who have lived in the old city of East Jerusalem since 1953. Israeli settlers, however, are now trying to force Nora from her home of over 60 years. There are many other cases like that. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that illegal settlements and constructions are a major roadblock that hinder peaceful negotiations? What are this Government doing to help prevent these infringements into Palestinian lives and land?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman’s question is incredibly important. I am well known as a strong friend of Israel, but I have to say that the first time I visited Jerusalem, had a proper tour around that wonderful city and saw what has happened with the effective encirclement of East Jerusalem—occupied East Jerusalem—I found it genuinely shocking. What this Government have consistently done and go on doing is to say that we are supporters of Israel, but we do not support illegal settlements and constructions are a major roadblock that hinder peaceful negotiations? What are this Government doing to help prevent these infringements into Palestinian lives and land?

Q13. [903656] Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Oil and gas has contributed over £300 billion to Treasury coffers. The Scottish Government, trade unions and Oil and Gas UK are calling for reductions to the headline rate of tax to support the industry in its hour of need. Yet, instead of the so-called “broad shoulders” of the UK, what we see are the slope shoulders of the Prime Minister, repeatedly dodging his responsibilities. Will he commit to reduce the tax level on oil and gas, and support this vital industry?

The Prime Minister: In the Budget last year, we reduced the burden of tax on oil and gas—something that we were able to do because of the broad shoulders of the UK. Now let us just examine what has happened since that time. Oil and gas revenues are down by 94%. If it were not for the broad shoulders of the UK Government and if instead this was a genuinely fiscally independent Scotland, there would be a massive black hole in its budget, and it would be cutting welfare, cutting spending, putting up taxes and facing a financial catastrophe.

Q15. [903658] Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Every week two women are killed in England and Wales by a current or former partner. The perpetrator is the problem: the question is not “Why doesn’t she leave?” but “Why doesn’t he stop?”

The Sussex police and crime commissioner is piloting a programme called Drive, which aims to change the behaviour of offenders. In advance of his new strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Katy Bourne on tackling domestic violence throughout Sussex?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that issue. We have got better at tackling the crime of domestic violence, but there is still so much more to do. Katy Bourne, whom I know, does an excellent job as the police and crime commissioner. I think that police and crime commissioners, who have a higher profile than police authorities ever had, can give a real lead on this sort of thing, and I urge others around the country to do exactly that. We also need to make sure that we are policing these incidents properly, and we need to change the culture, but I think that police and crime commissioners such as Katy Bourne can help to lead the way.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): As the Prime Minister knows, resources were ring-fenced following the fresh start agreement in November to help Northern Ireland to deal with legacy cases. Will the Prime Minister consider releasing some of that money—this has been hinted at by the Secretary of State—to help the Police Service of Northern Ireland as it faces increasing pressures on front-line policing? Will he also take this opportunity to reaffirm that there will be no rewriting of the past in Northern Ireland to legitimatise terrorism, or to promote a pernicious narrative that tries to make the security forces equivalent to terrorists?
The Prime Minister: The fresh start agreement was a good agreement, and an important part of it was dealing with legacy cases and ensuring that they were dealt with more quickly. To me, it has always been about trying to heal the hurt of the legacy cases rather than trying to write new narratives.

I shall consider carefully what the right hon. Gentleman has said about resources. We need to make sure that the policing of Northern Ireland continues to be properly resourced, not least because we still face a terrorist threat today.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): The United Kingdom endorses the Code of Good Practice on Referendums, published by the European Commission for Democracy through Law, which states:

“Equality of opportunity must be guaranteed for the supporters and opponents of the proposal being voted on.”

It also states:

“Equality must be ensured in terms of public subsidies and other forms of backing.”

Yesterday, Sir Jeremy Heywood sent a letter to Departments preventing Ministers from having access to civil service briefings. Has the Prime Minister checked whether that letter was compatible with the guidelines on neutrality?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy with the letter that was sent out, for this reason. The Government have a position on this issue: the Government’s position is that we would be better off in a reformed European Union. Ministers are able to depart from that position, and campaign in a personal capacity. That is, I think, a very important statement. It is right in terms of how we go about it, but it does not mean that the Government are neutral. It does not mean that the civil service is neutral. The Government have a policy from which people can depart.

As for the funding of the referendum campaign, we now have very clear laws and rules in place—and the Electoral Commission—to make sure that both campaigns are funded properly, and I think that is good for our democracy.
Scotland’s Fiscal Framework

12.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the new fiscal framework for Scotland, which was agreed yesterday by the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments.

I begin by paying tribute to everyone who has worked so hard to arrive at this point: my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney, who have led these negotiations with skill; my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, Lord Dunlop, whose contribution has been invaluable; and the dedicated teams of officials from Her Majesty’s Treasury and the Scottish Government who have worked tirelessly on behalf of their respective Governments. They can be proud of what has been achieved and the service they have given.

This is a truly historic deal that will pave the way for the Scottish Parliament to become one of the most powerful and accountable devolved Parliaments in the world. We have respected all the principles set out in the cross-party Smith agreement and delivered a deal that is fair for Scotland and fair for the whole United Kingdom. As Lord Smith said himself yesterday evening:

“...the vow stipulated clearly that the Barnett formula, including around £12 billion of income tax and around £5 billion of VAT, will not receive a penny less than Barnett funding over the course of the spending review simply due to different population growth. By the end of 2021, a review of the Barnett formula will be informed by an independent report. The Scottish Government will have extensive powers over tax, welfare and spending. They will have control over income tax and be able to change the rates and thresholds. They will be able to create new benefits, and of course the permanence of the Scottish Parliament is put beyond any doubt.

The people of Scotland voted for these new powers, and they deserve to hear from the parties in Scotland how they will use them. They are new powers that, if used well, can grow Scotland’s economy, and indeed population, and bring greater opportunity and prosperity. Now that we have agreed this fiscal framework, I hope and trust that this House and the other place will welcome it, while of course subjecting it to full scrutiny. I commend this statement to the House.

12.44 pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of his statement, and indeed for coming to the House yesterday to indicate he would be making it today. I begin by welcoming unequivocally the news that an agreement has been reached on the fiscal framework, and I would also like to echo the thanks to both Governments, the Deputy First Minister, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who is in his place, and of course the Secretary of State himself for working so hard to secure this historic deal. Our heartfelt thanks also go out to the officials of both Governments, who we all know are the people who do the real work in these negotiations.

Yesterday’s agreement marks the removal of the final obstacle to the transfer of significant and substantial powers to Scotland, and, as Lord Smith himself has said, the agreement “sees the recommendations of the Smith commission delivered in full.” Importantly, the vow stipulated clearly that the Barnett formula should remain the key mechanism for calculating Scotland’s budget. That has now been agreed and Barnett has been secured.

I note the Secretary of State’s commitment to publishing details of the agreement by the end of this week, and I welcome that commitment, but can he indicate whether this House will have time to scrutinise the agreement in detail? I have been saying for some time that greater transparency is required in the way these deals are negotiated. This process has highlighted the fact that future intergovernmental relationships must be improved to make these powers work for Scotland. Lord Smith’s recommendations that both Governments need “to work together to create a more productive, robust, visible and transparent relationship”
and that the Joint Ministerial Committee “must be reformed as a matter of urgency”
echo in this process. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this will be done?

We all know that the major stumbling block was the indexation method used for the block grant adjustment. Under the compromise reached, there will be a five-year transitional period, which will cover the full term of the next Scottish Parliament. Towards the end of that period, an independent review and recommendation will be published that will form the basis of a more permanent solution. When he gave evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s devolution Committee last night, the Secretary of State suggested that the period between the review being published and the transitional period ending at the end of March 2022 could be as little as 12 weeks. If no agreement is reached, what happens then?

On the transitional period itself, it is my understanding that the Scottish Fiscal Commission will carry out the necessary forecasts of Scottish GDP and tax revenues. Can the Secretary of State confirm that, under the terms of the fiscal framework negotiations, those forecasts will be fully independent of the Scottish Government? Last week, the Scottish Finance Committee voted against allowing for that independence.

There also seems to be some confusion over the block grant adjustment during the transitional period to 2022. The First Minister said it would be done according to the Treasury’s latest offer. The Secretary of State has said that the new income tax powers will be available by April 2017. However, the Deputy First Minister has said he does not agree that that timeframe is realistic. Will it be the catchily named tax capacity adjusted levels deduction, which I understand was the Chief Secretary to the Treasury’s latest offer?

Further clarity is also needed on the timeframe for the devolution of powers. The Secretary of State has said that the new income tax powers will be available by April 2017. However, the Deputy First Minister has said he does not agree that that timeframe is realistic. Is the Secretary of State able to confirm that the new tax powers will be transferred by April 2017?

Today the Scottish Government are passing the Scottish budget. Twelve months from now, at the time of the next Scottish budget, we want them to have full control of income tax and air passenger duty and the deployment of 50% of Scotland's VAT revenues. We also want them to have the considerable powers over welfare, which will allow us to design a new social security system for Scotland.

I welcome the review and the fact that it will be fully independent. I have stated several times that impartial oversight and, if necessary, arbitration should be an established part of intergovernmental relations. Will the Secretary of State tell us how the review body will be chosen, and can he confirm that it will be done in a spirit of consensus with the full agreement of both Governments? Will he also tell us to what extent the recommendations of the review will influence the decision taken on the long-term solution for block grant adjustment?

I close by welcoming once again the agreement that has been reached. Today marks an historic date in Scottish politics: the creation of one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world. The promises made to Scotland in 2014 have been met—the Smith agreement implemented, Barnett protected, powers transferred, the vow delivered. Scottish politics will never be the same again thanks to these new powers. We have entered a new and exciting era of devolution. What an opportunity to transform Scotland for everyone—an opportunity that my party will grasp with both hands.

David Mundell: I agree with most of what the hon. Gentleman said about the opportunity this presents to change Scottish politics. I think the people of Scotland want us to move on from discussing process to discussing policies and the difference that we can make for them with these extensive new powers. It is my full expectation that the agreement and associated details should be available tomorrow, and I very much hope that that will afford the maximum amount of scrutiny. It will of course be open to Committees of this House to scrutinise the arrangements as they see fit.

For understandable reasons, the hon. Gentleman makes reference to intergovernmental relations, but it is important to look at what Lord Smith said about how this agreement was arrived at. He said:

“It is difficult to imagine a bigger test of inter-governmental relationships and while it was obviously a very tough negotiation, what matters is that an agreement was reached.”

He continued:

“This provides an excellent basis for constructive engagement between the governments long into the future.”

I accept that fully. I believe that when the transition period is over and the independent reports have been published, it will be possible for the Governments to reach agreement.

The hon. Gentleman has asked many times why it has taken so long, but many important agreements are reached at the eleventh hour, just by the very nature of doing a deal. I am sure that we will be able, on the basis we have set out, to ensure that that is the case at the end of the transitional period. The independent review, to which he referred, will indeed be a matter for agreement between the two Governments, but as he is well aware, many people in Scotland hold themselves out as being independent but are perhaps not as independent as they superficially seem. It is therefore important that there is agreement between the two Governments as to how that independent review should go forward.

On the Fiscal Commission, the agreement with the Scottish Government is that its forecasts will be fully independent. Finally, this Government will place no impediment on the transfer of powers. Obviously we cannot impose the income tax powers on the Scottish Government, and we would not seek to do so, but I would have thought and hoped that they would want to take them on as soon as possible, and that is the end to which we will be working.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his apparent success in achieving a settlement of this difficult issue—we look forward to the details tomorrow. Can he assure the House that when the settlement is implemented, it will not only give a strong Scottish Government the powers they need to conduct their devolved affairs properly, but do nothing whatever to impair the ability of United Kingdom Governments to maintain financial discipline and healthy public finances for the British economy?

That, surely, is an essential condition for the future growth and prosperity of the English, British, Welsh, Irish—United Kingdom—economy.
David Mundell: I am very happy to give my right hon. and learned Friend the assurance he seeks. The Scottish fiscal framework will be consistent with the UK fiscal framework.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I begin by thanking the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and indeed for the conversations he had yesterday, given the constraints of parliamentary time and being able to make a statement only today? We appreciate his having done so.

I speak on behalf of all Scottish National party Members in welcoming the agreement on the fiscal framework, and we all look forward to the draft heads of agreement being published for parliamentary scrutiny in this place and in the Scottish Parliament later this week. My SNP colleagues in the Scottish Government were clear throughout these protracted negotiations that they would not sign a deal that included a threat to the Scottish budget. Members on the SNP Benches here, too, pursued the UK Government’s commitment to the principle of “no detriment”, a promise made during the Smith commission negotiations and a promise that the SNP has ensured has been delivered.

When negotiations began, Scotland’s budget faced a threat from the Treasury of a cut of £7 billion. This week, it was £3 billion, and yesterday morning it was £2.5 billion, but last night my colleagues in the Scottish Government secured a deal that will ensure that Scotland will not be a pound or even a penny worse off, and that the new powers that were promised will be delivered. I pay tribute to the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and the Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, for their efforts to stand up for Scotland and for being stronger for Scotland.

I welcome the fact that the UK Government will guarantee that the outcome of the Scottish Government’s preferred funding model—the per capita indexed deduction—is delivered in each of the next six years. I understand that a transitional funding arrangement will be reviewed following the UK and Scottish parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2021 respectively. The review will be informed by an independent report, with recommendations presented to both Governments by the end of 2021. In that context, let me say this: the Smith report was crystal clear that the fiscal framework must be agreed by both the UK and Scottish Governments. The Treasury tried to engineer an agreement that would have allowed it to impose a model of indexation without prejudice or a predetermined outcome, and it will be concluded by the end of 2021. There will be no imposition of any formula at the end of that period, and what happens will be by way of agreement. As I said in my previous comments, when I quoted what Lord Smith said, I believe that this process, through some of the most difficult types of negotiation, gives us confidence that in a maturing relationship the UK Government and the Scottish Government will be able to reach such an agreement.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Extrapolating recent population trends, what is the additional cost to England, Wales and Northern Ireland of the transitional arrangements on population?

David Mundell: There will be no additional cost to England, Wales and Northern Ireland from the powers being transferred compared with if we were not proceeding with this devolution settlement, because the sum being delivered to the Scottish Government is exactly the same as would have been delivered under the Barnett formula.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Scottish Government have committed to halving air passenger duty in 2018, if still in government, that leaves Newcastle airport, in my constituency, most at risk from cross-border tax competition. Following today’s statement, when can we expect a decision from the Government on support for regional airports, as promised by the Prime Minister? Ongoing uncertainty is very damaging to regional economies, and an approach of “wait and see” is not acceptable.

David Mundell: I note what the hon. Lady says. Of course people in Scotland will know that the SNP position used to be to abolish air passenger duty completely, so there is somewhat of a change there. None the less, she makes an important point. There is a review, and I am sure that those issues will be considered as the Budget process goes ahead in this Parliament.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Is not the measure of statesmanship the imagination to give to others what one demands for oneself? For centuries, the English have demanded full control over our spending and taxation. Why should the Scottish people feel any different? Does the Secretary of State not realise that there must be some merit in the argument that as long as we maintain the outdated, outdated and unfair Barnett formula, which thoroughly disadvantages the English, we will simply stoke up resentment on both sides of the border, and that will ultimately lead to more calls for independence?

David Mundell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming the parts of the agreement that he did. This has been a negotiation, and this is the point arrived at in the agreement; it is not possible for the Treasury or the UK Government to have engineered an agreement, as what was needed was the agreement of the Scottish Government, and that is what has been achieved. The two parties have been able to reach an agreement on a fiscal framework that is both fair to Scotland and fair to the people of Scotland.

I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the review will go ahead on an independent basis, without prejudice or a predetermined outcome, and it will be concluded by the end of 2021. There will be no imposition of any formula at the end of that period, and what happens will be by way of agreement. As I said in my previous comments, when I quoted what Lord Smith said, I believe that this process, through some of the most difficult types of negotiation, gives us confidence that in a maturing relationship the UK Government and the Scottish Government will be able to reach such an agreement.
black hole in their finances, and that full fiscal freedom is not the answer. Further devolution as set out in the Scotland Bill to create a powerhouse Parliament is what the people of Scotland want and it is what this Government are delivering.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Let me congratulate all the parties involved on managing to agree on a position that got us here, which is that principle of no detriment. I also thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Deputy First Minister for attending the Scottish Affairs Committee. I hope that the Chief Secretary will agree to attend the Committee again to explain a little bit more about the details of this fiscal framework. At the beginning of the process, we heard that the Treasury intended to cut £7 billion from the Scottish budget. Why did the Treasury intend to cut billions of pounds from the Scottish budget, and what did he, as the Secretary of State for Scotland, attempt to do about it?

David Mundell: I know the hon. Gentleman does not understand the concept of negotiation, in which two sides work together to get an agreement. Assertion and soundbites sound good, but they do not deliver for the people of Scotland. What delivers for the people of Scotland is the two Governments working together to produce a sustainable agreement. That is what we have done; we have an agreement that underpins the Scotland Bill, which means that Scotland can get these extensive new powers over tax and welfare. People will now want to move on from the process debate to hear the policy ideas.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): During the inquiry of the Scottish Affairs Committee into the fiscal framework, we asked searching questions of our witnesses about the new welfare powers that have been devolved to Scotland. Has my right hon. Friend heard any details from the Scottish Government about how they plan to use the new welfare powers?

David Mundell: I very much welcome the fact that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have indicated that they plan to set out how they intend to use the powers. It was interesting to hear some of the media reports in Scotland that suggest that the SNP plans to increase significantly the tax burden on middle income earners in Scotland. Obviously, we will have to await the detail in the manifesto, but there will be no excuses now. SNP Members can come here and complain about certain welfare changes, but they will have the ability within Scotland to set their own welfare arrangements.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Scottish Government have been able to achieve their chosen deduction method through their vigorous and skilled negotiation strategy. What advice will the Secretary of State give to the Welsh Government when it comes to negotiating the fiscal framework for Wales? Does he think that the Labour Government’s usual passive compliance with the Treasury will work?

David Mundell: What I am clear about is that the position in Wales will be as it is in Scotland: the people of Wales will benefit most when the Welsh Government and the United Kingdom Government work constructively together for their benefit.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Is it not time that we heard from the Scottish Government detailed plans to devolve power down to the Scottish communities? Devolution should not stop at Holyrood.

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I am sure that he will have read my speech of 21 December delivered in Glasgow City chambers making exactly the case for devolution within Scotland. Unfortunately, in recent times, Scotland has become one of the most centralised countries in terms of government. The new Scottish Government that will be elected in May should devolve further powers. The best way to achieve that is to elect more Conservative MSPs under Ruth Davidson’s leadership.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): How great it is to follow that remark from the Secretary of State! How does the amount agreed by the UK Government for the implementation costs compare with the Government’s current calculations for implementing the deal agreed at last week’s EU summit on benefits for foreign workers in the UK?

David Mundell: I welcome the hon. Lady’s question, because of course she and I were both Scottish Conservative candidates for the Scottish Parliament in the dim and distant past—[Interruption.] I am sure that the detail of this agreement and the issues that she raises will stand up to scrutiny.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is a moderately unedifying spectacle when such large numbers of Members are quite so vociferous. The saving grace is that all of them do have a very notable smile on their face, so at least there is good humour in the Chamber.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Mr Mak, you wish to give the House the benefit of your views.

Mr Mak: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Does he agree that the conclusion of this new agreement shows that Scotland’s two Governments can work together? Will he undertake to keep pressing the Scottish Government to reveal details of how they will use these new powers?

David Mundell: I certainly do agree with my hon. Friend, and I have, on a number of occasions in this Chamber, paid particular and sincere tribute to the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney. He and I have had numerous conversations throughout this process and, although at times we have been in disagreement, they have always been cordial and civil. That is the basis of the relationship that I want to see with the Scottish Government. My hon. Friend is right: what this agreement means is that the Scotland Bill can pass through this House and, hopefully, receive the legislative consent motion at Holyrood. There will then be no hiding place on these issues for the Scottish Government. If they want to spend more, they will have the tax powers to do so, and if they want higher welfare, they will have the ability to achieve that.
Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): My constituents will welcome this agreement. In particular, they will welcome the fact that the Scottish Government were able to persuade the Treasury to abandon its initial position, which would have meant £7 billion of cuts to Scottish finances, and to come to the Smith position that there should be no detriment. They will observe though that had that been the original position for the Treasury, we might have been able to get this agreement before Christmas rather than spend all this time on it. Will the Secretary of State confirm that it is now the case, beyond doubt, that the principle of no detriment to the Scottish budget is enshrined in his Government’s thinking both now and in the future?

David Mundell: Yes, as is the other element of the Smith commission consideration of no detriment, which is taxpayer fairness—not just in Scotland, but across the UK.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): The vow was very clear that Barnett would be retained. That has been done, and rightly so. The starting point for public spending now in Scotland is 15% of the UK average. Can the Secretary of State tell the House, in terms of his modelling, what that percentage per capita will be at the end of this Parliament?

David Mundell: As my hon. Friend asks for complex calculations, I will certainly be happy to write to him in that regard. Although I respect his strongly held views in relation to the Barnett formula, I have to say that the Government’s clear position is that the Barnett formula is being retained.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Following yesterday’s devastating votes on the Lords amendments to the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, can the Secretary of State say a little more about the limited powers available to the Scottish Government to hold population risks. Will he concede that the limited powers available to the Scottish Government do not allow for population growth? Will he now listen to calls for a Scottish post-study work scheme?

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We have had a particularly mild November, December and January because the Secretary of State for Scotland promised the Scottish Affairs Committee an agreement by the autumn. Can he let us know when he expects the Bill to complete its passage through the House of Lords; when he expects it to come back to the House of Commons; and when he expects it to get Royal Assent?

David Mundell: In respect of the first two questions, I expect that to be March. I hope Royal Assent will be achievable in March but it may be April. I am also respectful of the Scottish Parliament process and the need for a legislative consent motion.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I note that he mentions the UK Government holding population risks. Will he concede that the limited powers available to the Scottish Government do not allow for population growth? Will he now listen to calls for a Scottish post-study work scheme?
David Mundell: On the latter subject, I have had the pleasure of appearing before the Scottish Affairs Committee and being grilled by the hon. Lady on the issue of student work visas. I made it clear that I would look closely at the report produced by the Committee, and I repeat that undertaking. However, I do not accept the premise of her question. I believe that, properly used, the tax and other powers that the Scottish Government have will allow them to grow the Scottish economy, create jobs and grow the population of Scotland.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about negotiations. This is an important point. When the Treasury first considered making £7 billion worth of cuts to the Scottish budget, can the Secretary of State—Scotland’s man in the Cabinet—tell us what personal interventions he made to the Treasury to protect Scotland?

David Mundell: I have been closely involved in these discussions throughout, but they are negotiations—they are not about the Treasury imposing. As Lord Smith recognises, they are about the two Governments coming together in difficult circumstances to negotiate about money, which is often the most contentious thing that is ever the subject of negotiations. We have demonstrated that both Governments had the maturity to reach a deal which is good for Scotland and good for the rest of the United Kingdom.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Secretary of State for Scotland has just confirmed that the initial proposal put forward by the Treasury of a £7 billion cut to Scotland’s budget was not an opening negotiation position, but a serious proposal. In the light of that, does he consider himself Scotland’s man in the Cabinet, or the Cabinet’s man in Scotland?

David Mundell: What complete and utter nonsense. This was a negotiation. Of course, it was conducted not by SNP MPs, but by John Swinney, who adopted a completely different tone—a civil and cordial tone—throughout. I respect his objective of getting the best deal for Scotland. That is my objective too, but we had to get an agreement, and we got one. It is a good agreement. It is an opportunity to move away from the grievance agenda, but this afternoon’s proceedings leave me in doubt that, even with these extensive new powers, the SNP will be able to leave that grievance agenda behind.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Secretary of State has repeatedly criticised the SNP for allegedly failing to set out how it will use the new powers contained in the legislation, yet barely an hour ago the Prime Minister floundered badly when asked whether the Scottish Conservatives would reduce the tax rate on high earners. I am sure the Secretary of State will want to avoid suggestions of hypocrisy and extend his criticism to his boss.

David Mundell: I have nothing but admiration for Ruth Davidson. She is the one person in the Scottish Parliament who can stand up to the SNP and hold it to account. If people do not want a one-party state in Scotland, the way to achieve that is by voting Scottish Conservative. The Prime Minister did not flounder; he told us exactly what the position was. Ruth will set out the tax proposals and they certainly will not be the same as the SNP’s proposals, revealed in the Scottish press today to hit middle earners hard.
1.18 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With your forbearance, I would like to raise a matter that was addressed in the Adjournment debate on Monday evening. During the debate, I asked the Minister about negotiations that might have taken place ahead of a proposal to allow ship-to-ship transfers in the Cromarty firth. Specifically, I asked whether Marine Scotland, representing the Scottish Government, had been consulted. The Minister replied:

“The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned the Cromarty firth oil transfer licence. Marine Scotland was directly consulted on 10 December, and on 8 February, when the consultation ended, it had not responded. When it was asked whether it intended to respond, the answer was no. I hope that that clarifies that point.”—[Official Report, 22 February 2016; Vol. 606, c. 123.]

That was a very clear statement, and I was very surprised to hear the Minister make it, because I would have expected that Marine Scotland, on behalf of the Scottish Government, had responded to the consultation. I therefore checked the situation with the Scottish Government and received the following response:

“The Scottish Government is not aware of being directly approached by the UK Government during the consultation on the Cromarty Firth Oil Transfers. Marine Scotland was made aware of the proposal through informal contact by the Port of Cromarty Firth.”

It is safe to say that Marine Scotland was not contacted by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency or by the UK Government.

That is a very worrying statement, because it leaves open the suggestion that the Government have perhaps been economical with the truth at the very least in what has been said in the House. That is a very serious matter, not least because of the potential threat to people in my community of ship-to-ship transfers taking place, and of the Scottish Government not being adequately consulted on their responsibilities for environmental protection. I therefore seek your advice, Mr Speaker, on how I may deal with this matter and whether it would be appropriate for the Minister to correct the record.

Mr Speaker: It is open to any Member who believes that he or she has made a mistake to correct the record voluntarily. It is not the responsibility of the Chair to arbitrate between competing claims about a sequence of events, and nor is it my responsibility to interpret what the Minister might have meant in responding to the hon. Gentleman at the time. The hon. Gentleman has made his point with force and alacrity—we would expect no less of him. If the Secretary of State wishes to respond, he is perfectly at liberty to do so, but he is under no obligation.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have noted what the hon. Gentleman has said and will have the matter investigated.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State has kindly said that he will have the matter investigated. I ought to emphasise, for the avoidance of doubt, that he was not the Minister who answered in the debate. I hope that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is satisfied with his prodigious efforts for the day and that we might now move on to other fare. I know that he will be absolutely delighted that we can now move on to the ten-minute rule motion, to be put forward by his hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). I am sure that he is sitting expectantly with that in mind.
Consumer Protection (Distance Selling Delivery Charges)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.22 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require distance sellers to provide purchasers with a lowest available delivery cost option; to introduce a scheme for a fair delivery quality mark for responsible retailers; to establish penalties where vendors advertise free delivery but subsequently impose charges or conditions; and for connected purposes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring in the Bill, for this is indeed an issue that my constituents deal with on a daily basis and tell me about regularly. I know that the Minister for Skills is aware of our concerns, and I am grateful to him for his engagement so far. There is consumer appetite for improved online shopping throughout our communities, but there are areas that are being badly served by some retailers and carriers. Online shopping is a growing market, and it is particularly important to rural communities, and paying more in rural areas—the highlands and islands, for example—is unfair.

We know that the costs of delivery will always vary, but that is not what this is about; this is about people feeling excluded because of a disproportionately narrow and costly range of delivery options. Even people living in cities such as Inverness are being charged punitive surcharges for the delivery of goods. One of my constituents was asked to pay £90 for the delivery of a mobile phone. Current legislation is not working.

I am grateful for the support of hon. Members from all the nations of the UK who have experienced similar issues. For example, 43% of consumers in Northern Ireland have encountered a delivery surcharge, and it is estimated that shoppers there can pay, on average, an additional £7.93 on top of standard UK delivery costs. For goods delivered to the highlands and islands, 53% of retailers apply a delivery surcharge and consumers have to pay, on average, an additional £14.71.

Unfairness is not only wrong; it is bad for business. Resentful customers are created when seven in 10 consumers reluctantly pay a surcharge for delivery of their item, and they will look elsewhere next time. There are those who will tell us that these are just market forces at work, but in this connected world it has already been accepted that there is a need for universal services in broadband provision, to allow everyone to participate. Why does that not extend to the product at the end of the process?

If all this seems like small beer to some people, it should be remembered that this type of injustice lives longest in the memory and the higher the price in loss of trust through disconnect. Because of their postcodes, people are considered to be in the minority, to be unimportant and to be left behind. Why should we allow that prejudice? Many are already asked to pay more for fuel and heating, and among them are often the more vulnerable consumers. That is why it needs to be our collective responsibility, when talking about the delivery of goods, to first deliver the principle of fairness.

Let us now shine a light on good retailers and carriers. The Bill calls for the introduction of a kitemark or quality mark. Many companies work hard to ensure that they provide a good service across our nations, and they should be celebrated and recognised. Highlighting their good practices will allow them to access and help those currently being discriminated against, and they in turn will benefit from increased business. The really good news for companies is that those consumers are proven to be exceptionally loyal, and they will buy again.

There is a reason why operators such as eBay have introduced a “premium seller” badge for their vendors: it makes good business sense. Indeed, the principles that eBay seeks to apply to its traders are very similar to those that I am proposing today for the wider market. A key part of eBay’s rating is based on delivery and shipping costs, and sellers lose their “premium seller” rating when they have poor feedback. In this example there is a consequence for poor behaviour.

However, the wider distance selling market has no such rewards, and there are no clearly understood consequences for bad practice, or indeed for mis-selling of delivery. The introduction of an industry-wide kitemark or quality mark will allow consumers easily to identify those traders and carriers that can be trusted. That can be industry-led. Of course it will need careful thought, but there are no barriers that cannot be overcome.

The Consumer Rights Act 2015 aimed to make consumer law clearer, but recent research has shown that a number of retailers are still unsure of their responsibilities. Greater awareness is needed to better support retailers. This is not an isolated problem. In preparing the Bill, I spoke with consumer groups, trading standards, retailers and couriers, and they all agree that there is a lack of clarity. Current legislation sets out that consumers should have

“upfront disclosure of pertinent delivery information at an early stage in the transaction process”. But that is not happening. Seven in 10 consumers do try to seek out that information prior to checkout, but recent research by Citizens Advice Scotland and the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland has shown that some retailers are still not complying fully with new consumer legislation.

When vendors or delivery companies unfairly discriminate based on location, there needs to be a clear understanding of the rights of the consumers and the redress that they would have in relation to such unfairness and false advertising. Existing laws are often unenforced and are too cumbersome; so opportunities for administrative penalties need to be considered.

Of course, online retailers have the right to choose where they supply their goods or services, but consumers should also have the right to know before they get to the last page of their transaction what they will be charged. Up-front information should include prominent and transparent key contract terms, including the total price of the goods and services and all delivery charges, not misleading terms. For example, people are told that they can take advantage of free delivery within the UK when that is not true.

In the highlands and in my constituency there are many mysteries, such as the location of the Loch Ness monster, but the biggest mystery has to be why Inverness, one of the fastest growing cities in Europe, and towns such as Nairn are apparently not on the mainland, at least according to some couriers. People are
not buying boxes to be sent to Brigadoon; they are asking for things to be sent to a modern city.

The discrimination test has failed, sometimes unintentionally, but couriers can make the situation worse for retailers by using out-of-date postcode software. This is an inconsistent and variable approach by some retailers to the disclosure of delivery information, which can lead to confusion, shopping fatigue, cart abandonment and, ultimately, lost revenue for the retailers themselves.

There must be a greater understanding among consumers, retailers and couriers of their rights and of the consequences of bad practice. It is not just me saying that: organisations such as Citizens Advice Scotland are calling for greater intervention and education.

The Bill also sets out the need for greater consumer choice over delivery options. People often do not have choices. Again, why are people in the highlands and islands paying nearly £15 more for delivery when we have a universal Royal Mail service? They should have that as a clear option. Alternatively, they should be able to have goods sent to recognised collection points or to arrange pick-up directly from the vendor. The answer is simple: give the consumer the right to choose.

As a former retailer, I know that that will mean a change in working practices, but barriers can always be overcome, and that will result in better business. Companies make adjustments all the time to improve, and I am sure that exciting new business opportunities could be explored, including the use of delivery brokers or working with other companies to maximise potential.

In introducing the Bill, we offer to work with the Government, business and others to establish change and to provide not just yet another set of promises, but a set of solutions. Let us recognise the good work of fair retailers and delivery companies through a kitemark. Let us make sure that there is clarity about the expectations in current legislation, and let us consider the option of administrative penalties for continued abuse. We should give consumers the choice over delivery and let them decide whether they want the universal service.

There are challenges, but let us decide to support those who find themselves in the position I have described. They are not asking for the unattainable. They do not expect to be treated with undue favour. They should not continue to be ignored. They deserve to be listened to. This is the time to extend inclusion and end exclusion.

I want to start today’s important debate by saying how lucky I am to come from a family in which there have always been such strong and hard-working women—my mother and grandparents, and now my wife and daughter. If there is one thing I have learned from all of them, it is that no one should ever try to pull the wool over their eyes—to take them for fools—because I guarantee they will always be found out.

That is a lesson the Tories really should have learned back in 1991—when they first started planning to equalise the pension age for women with that for men—because that is precisely what has happened: they have been found out. They have been found to have failed in their duty to inform women properly about the changes that were planned. They have been found to have failed in their duty to inform women properly about the changes that were planned. They have been found to have left hundreds of thousands of women ill-prepared for a decision that would see the worst affected lose up to £36,000 in pension payments. They were found to have compounded their error in 2011, when a further delay to the pension age—to 66—was rammed through with barely two years’ notice. In the words of their current Pensions Minister, they have been found to have “pulled the rug” from under 2.6 million British women. Today, Labour will speak for those 2.6 million women and demand that the Government tell us what they plan to do to make amends.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Before we get too party political about this, it can indeed be said that an individual notice should have been given back in 1995. However, shortly after that, Labour came in, and there were perhaps a dozen Labour Pensions Ministers during all of Labour’s time in office. We are 20 years on.

Can the hon. Gentleman not accept that we all have lessons to learn? An individual notice should have been sent out by at least one of those Governments—by the Conservative Government or the Labour Government. The hon. Gentleman had an opportunity to do that over all those years.

Owen Smith: With respect, I did not have an opportunity because I was not here at the time. The hon. Gentleman is right that successive Governments have lessons to learn from this sorry affair, but the truth, as I intend to spell out, is that a change was first mooted in 1991, and the then Tory Government made no substantive efforts between 1991 and 1997, when they left office, to offer people a proper notice. Thereafter, the Labour Government did attempt to do that, and I will enumerate exactly the ways we tried to make amends. However, the problem was compounded by the coalition Government’s actions in 2011. If anybody has lessons to learn, it is the
Conservative party, which has the greatest responsibility for these changes, and which now has a duty to make amends.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Smith: I will make some progress if I may, and then I will give way.

These things started back in 1991. That was when the Tory Government first consulted on their intention to shift the state pension age for women to 65 from 60, where it had been since the 1940s. Then, in the 1993 Budget, the Chancellor formally stated his intention to make this move, and he legislated for it through 1994 and 1995. The Pensions Act 1995 stipulated that the pension age would rise by five years during the decade from 2010 to 2020. That meant that women born between April 1950 and December 1959 would have to wait between one month and five years more before they could draw their pensions.

One would have thought that such a massive change—the biggest change to women’s pensions in half a century—would have been communicated with great care and, in truth, fanfare, but it was not. Some of the women concerned were as young as 39 at the time, so it is unlikely that they were looking carefully at the financial papers or paying much attention to the Government’s scant efforts to tell them about the changes.

John Glen: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that, in 2004, the Work and Pensions Committee found that three quarters of women between the ages of 45 and 54 at the time were aware of the changes in the 1995 Act? I accept that there were mistakes by parties on both sides of the House in terms of communication, but three quarters of women knew 12 years ago about the changes.

Owen Smith: I am pleased to swap stories about what people knew at the time, because the truth is that the question asked in that 2004 survey by the then Labour Government, who were concerned that the previous Tory Government had not made proper provision for women, was, unfortunately, not as straightforward as it should have been. Other surveys—five or six—from academics and others in the pensions world found that about 70% to 80% of the women involved did not know that the changes were taking place. It is no surprise they did not know, because the Conservative Government at the time spent very little money advertising the change. There were a few adverts in the newspapers, and letters were available to individuals if they requested them, but many did not.

Several hon. Members rose—

Owen Smith: I will quote one of those letters when I have given way to my hon. Friends.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Constituents changed. That is an extremely common experience for MPs, because the letters sent out in 1995 by the then Tory Government were neither use nor ornament. I have got one here that was sent to a woman on 13 June 1995. This letter has five pages, and not one of them mentions that the pension age is going to rise to 65. In fact, every single page refers to the fact that the state pension age for women is 60. The final page offers the extraordinary suggestion that “a form inviting you to claim your State Retirement Pension will be sent to you” a few “months before you reach 60.” This happened in the very month that the Bill that became the 1995 Act was going through this House under that Government. That is a measure of what a desperately poor job they did of informing people.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I have lost count of the number of constituents who have contacted me to say that they had absolutely no idea about these pension changes and heard about them on the radio or the TV. Fortunately, we are raising the profile of this issue on the Government’s behalf. Is it not insulting of Government Members to suggest that these women are wrong, or lying, or that there is something wrong with them, when ultimately it is the Government’s responsibility to communicate these changes?

Owen Smith: It is wrong, it is insulting, and it compounds the more fundamental insult that women who, by and large, have smaller pensions because they had lower earnings throughout their entire lifetime while bearing a burden for the rest of us, have been told that they cannot access their pension. That is the real insult that we should be worried about.

My hon. Friend is right that it is completely insulting to suggest that proper notice was given, because the truth is that it was a botched job from start to finish. We know that because the current Conservative Pensions Minister in the House of Lords says so. She says quite clearly that “until recently, many of these women were expecting to receive their state pension at age 60, since they were unaware of the changes made in 1995”.

The Government are damned out of their own mouths.

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I am going to be unusually helpful to the Opposition spokesman. I am one of these women. I have never received a letter, I have never been notified, and I think the Department might know where I live.

Owen Smith: I cannot believe for a minute that the hon. Lady is old enough to be one of the women concerned. It tests the credibility of the House that that could be so. I am nevertheless grateful for her intervention.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that there are a lot of women like Jayne Manners in my constituency, who assumed she was going to retire at 60, is now disabled, and has no ability whatsoever to make up the difference for the six years she has lost because of these changes?

Owen Smith: That is the case for thousands of women across this country. That is why this is more than a small campaign: there is a fundamental injustice that must be changed.
Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. Increasing numbers of women in my constituency have been coming to my surgery and writing to me about this, many of whom I have known for many years because I was born and bred in the constituency. I am absolutely convinced of their sincerity and that they knew nothing about this because of the lack of notification. We saw earlier at Prime Minister’s Question Time the Prime Minister’s complete lack of understanding, or even care, for these women.

Owen Smith: My hon. Friend is of course entirely right. He will know, because he was part of the previous Labour Government, that we tried to improve this set of circumstances. We conducted the survey that showed that there was a worryingly low level of understanding. Between 2004 and 2009, the then Labour Government instituted several million-pound advertising campaigns and sent out 500,000 personalised letters to the affected women, such as the one I have here, which, in stark contrast to the Tory letter I cited, says on the first page that the addressee will be affected by the change in age from 60 to 65.

The reality is testified to by many of my hon. Friends and by the brilliant women of the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—campaign, whose tenacity and truth-telling we should pay tribute to right across this House, because they speak for hundreds of thousands of women who did not know that they were in the firing line.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): A total of 4,465 women in my constituency are going to be affected by this. Does my hon. Friend agree that it has been caused by an historical inequality in the system?

Owen Smith: Of course it has, because historical inequalities existed then and persist now. The gender pay gap affects women. Women often do not have the full stamp because of their caring duties, and that is why it is doubly unjust that they should now be asked to pay a price in their retirement.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this generation of women are doubly disadvantaged, because many were at work before the Equal Pay Act 1970 came into force and had to take low-paid part-time jobs because of lack of childcare, and the Government are now heaping insult upon injury in disadvantaging them again in retirement?

Owen Smith: My hon. Friend spoke with great eloquence in the recent Westminster Hall debate after a petition of 155,000 signatures was brought to this place, with more signatures from the constituency of my right hon. Friend. The Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) than anywhere else in the country—a magnificent job by the women of Leigh.

I will quote once more the current Pensions Minister, who said:

“Across the country I’m hearing from women who are enduring that sudden sickening realisation that their destiny in retirement is not in their own hands—this is not about fairytale luxury retirement villas, this is about affording the basics.”

That is the view of the current Pensions Minister, and the Government cannot run from it.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I would like to challenge the figure that was quoted by a Member on the Government Benches. The Opposition spokesman might have the correct figure, but the figure reported from the Department for Work and Pensions investigation in 2004 was just above 40%, not 75%. Surely, given such a cataclysmic change, every single one of these women should have had a simple letter on the doormat in 1995.

Owen Smith: The hon. Lady is entirely right. Even if 40% of women were unaware, that is 40% too many. As I said, five or six other surveys were done by academics and those in other institutions that suggested that 80% of women were unaware that they were going to be affected, so the reality is that the number was far greater.

The scale of this problem only truly started to dawn on people when the Government decided to double down on their calamity with the Pensions Act 2011.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend is about to come on to the injustice of the 2011 Act. Is not the real issue not only that these ladies have been hit not once but twice by an increase in their state pension age, but that no transitional arrangement was put in place? Is that not why it is absolutely right that we support the Labour motion to get the Government off the fence and provide these ladies with the transitional arrangement they deserve?

Owen Smith: This House and Government Members would do well to heed the words of my hon. Friend, because, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), he has been the doughtiest campaigner in this House on behalf of these women. He speaks the truth when he says that Members from across the House should back our motion to provide transitional protections for them.

The 2011 Act not only broke the Government’s promise that the pension age for women was not going to rise until 2020, but broke the promise that no rises would occur without at least 10 years’ notice, because the women who suffered the double blow were given just two years’ notice. The former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, has described that decision as an ill-informed “mistake”. He tried to make up for it in office, and secured some mitigation for 300,000 of the women who were due to see their state pension age go up by more than 18 months. The Minister on the Front Bench will no doubt mention this shortly, telling us that it cost £1.1 billion, but I bet he will not remind us that his predecessor was looking for £3 billion in order to offer these transitional protections. I suspect he may only say sotto voce that half of that £1 billion went not to women but to men.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I support the motion, because I support the WASPI women and I support transitional arrangements, but I have to say that the hon. Gentleman is making it more difficult for me and for colleagues to vote for the motion by making the matter so partisan. Thirteen years of Labour government did not help the situation. May I therefore suggest that in the spirit of the motion, which I support, he could give more details of what those transitional arrangements should be, so that we can at
last start the dialogue that the Government should have started some time ago to see whether there is a middle way and a compromise to help the women who desperately need it?

**Owen Smith:** I am sorry if I am bruising the hon. Gentleman’s feelings with my remarks. I am pleased that he has supported the campaign, and I know that he has been brave enough to speak in favour of it on several occasions. I am positive that a man of his resolve will not be put off by a few words across the Dispatch Box and will vote for the motion, irrespective of what I say; at least, I trust that he will. I will come on to talk about precisely the sorts of transitional arrangements that the Government should put in place.

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP):** This is the third opportunity we have had to debate this important matter in the Chamber and Westminster Hall. Notwithstanding the mistakes of the past or who made them, the Government have an opportunity to do the right thing by the women of this country. Why do they not just grasp the opportunity with both hands and deliver that for those women?

**Owen Smith:** Why do they not do so? The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions occasionally comes to the Chamber to answer questions, but he has ducked out of the last five debates, and he is not here today. I have suggested before that we ought to sanction him for failing to turn up to work, and I think that may be a good idea. The truth is that the Government are not offering any further suggestions about how they might do what the Secretary of State promised in 2011. He said at the Dispatch Box that transitional arrangements would be put in place for these women, but he has not offered any such arrangements. The Government have offered nothing but defensive positions.

I hate to be partisan; it is really not in my nature. However, I cannot but draw Members’ attention to the Government’s failure to turn up to work, and I think that may be a good idea. The truth is that the Government are not offering any further suggestions about how they might do what the Secretary of State promised in 2011. He said at the Dispatch Box that transitional arrangements would be put in place for these women, but he has not offered any such arrangements. The Government have offered nothing but defensive positions.

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**Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab):** One of the 4,100 women in my constituency affected by the changes recently told me that throughout her life a number of changes have impacted on her and the many thousands of women of her generation, such as unequal pay, the ability of employers to dismiss women because they were pregnant, and a lack of childcare. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is still time for the Government to correct that injustice and, in the interests of being non-partisan, to do the right thing and put in place transitional measures?

**Owen Smith:** My hon. Friend is entirely right. Women have suffered a million and one other injustices in the workplace and on payday for generations, and this is another injustice being heaped upon them.

**Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind):** Will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to acknowledge the serious injustice suffered by women who were born in the 1950s who have been offered and have accepted retirement packages from their employers that included figures based on the assumption that the retirement age would be 60?

**Owen Smith:** It is no surprise that the hon. Lady, who speaks with great erudition, has highlighted yet another injustice that women have suffered. I say again that the Government must recognise that and bring forward some suggestions. There are myriad ways in which they could mitigate the problem. There are lots of transitional arrangements that could be put in place, and I will list six of them.

**Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab):** The case that my hon. Friend is making is absolutely right. The point is that Governments, on occasion, make mistakes. It is not too late for Ministers to stand at the Dispatch Box, put things right and end the misery of thousands of people—not only women, but their husbands, who are equally affected financially by the impact on the household. The Government could put that right.

**Owen Smith:** The Government could do so, and the Minister has five minutes or so to come up with what he wants to say to put it right. In case he has no ideas written down, I will give him six suggestions. The Government could delay the pension age increase until 2020 so that the pension age reached 66 by 2021. That option is favoured by the Pensions Minister in the House of Lords. The Government could cap the maximum state pension age increase until 2020 so that the pension age reached 66 by 2021. That option is favoured by the Pensions Minister in the House of Lords. The Government could delay the pension age increase until 2020 so that the pension age reached 66 by 2021. That option is favoured by the Pensions Minister in the House of Lords. The Government could delay the pension age increase until 2020 so that the pension age reached 66 by 2021. That option is favoured by the Pensions Minister in the House of Lords. The Government could delay the pension age increase until 2020 so that the pension age reached 66 by 2021. That option is favoured by the Pensions Minister in the House of Lords. The Government could delay the pension age increase until 2020 so that the pension age reached 66 by 2021. That option is favoured by the Pensions Minister in the House of Lords.
Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The six points that my hon. Friend has just raised would be helpful to the 3,450 women in my constituency—

Nadine Dorries: All six of them?

Mr Mahmood: All six points, yes. They would be important for the woman who wrote to me this morning to say that she never received the letter and she only found out what was going on through her workplace pension. Unfortunately, she is now unemployed and has been for 20 months. She is trying hard to get a job, but she is extremely worried about how much longer she will have to work to make up for the lost contributions. She is in a very difficult position and has no guidance from anybody. Why do the Government not help her?

Owen Smith: My hon. Friend speaks with passion and knowledge about the 4,000-odd women in his constituency who are affected. There are thousands of women in a similar position in all our constituencies, and my hon. Friend’s point is clear: one of the transitional measures must be put in place.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Constituents such as Mrs Cox in my constituency do not object to the principle of equalisation, but they object, as my hon. Friend is quite rightly saying, to the speed and scale of the changes. That is why his points about transitional arrangements are so important to Mrs Cox and many others. Will he also deal with the insidious evasion of responsibility among some Conservative Members, who are trying to blame the European Union rather than their own Government’s decision for the measures that have been taken? The same thing is not happening in other countries. It is the Government’s decision, and no one else’s.

Owen Smith: I expect that the Secretary of State is out in Europe somewhere right now blaming the European Union for his sins of inaction. Mrs Cox speaks for all the women in the WASPI campaign who are not opposed to the equalisation of the state pension age at 65 or 66, but who are opposed to the injustices that are being visited on them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Owen Smith: I am going to make a little more progress, and then I will give way. The truth is that we have had quite enough talk. The sins of omission and commission are well known, and the Government should now act. The Bills in 1995 and 2011 were their Bills, and the mistakes were their mistakes, so it is for them to put things right. Women in Britain have suffered inequality in the workplace and on payday for far too long. No Government should compound that fact when the carers and the grafters in our society, on whom we rely for so much, reach their retirement day.

There is a Budget in three weeks, and the Chancellor has a golden opportunity to rise to the challenge and put in place one of the six variants of transitional arrangements that I have talked about. He would be well advised to do so.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions the Budget. Does he agree that, given the corporation tax cuts and the cuts to inheritance tax in the Chancellor’s most recent Budget, the Chancellor clearly has the will to spend and should now pay attention to the WASPI campaign?

Owen Smith: At the last Budget, the Chancellor happened to find £27 billion extra in tax revenues, which was a very handy little windfall to find down the back of the sofa, but the WASPI women will have heard that he did not spend a red cent of it—not a penny—on them, as he could have done. If he continues to play the WASPI women for fools and continues to take our pensioners for granted, then, as Baroness Altmann has told him already, he will live to regret it.

That is a sentiment that we can share right across the House. It is why not a single Conservative Member chose to vote against either of the previous calls for transitional arrangements in any of the debates we have held. It is why so many Conservative Back Benchers have pledged their support to the WASPI campaign. It is why this issue will not go away without action from the Government.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Owen Smith: I give way to the doughty campaigner from Eccles.

Barbara Keeley: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way at this point because I want to make sure that we are not given the same excuses by the Minister, when he speaks in a moment, that he has previously given. We heard: “Equalisation was necessary to meet the UK’s obligations under EU law”.—[Official Report, 2 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 145WH.]

Conservative Members have been writing that out, but it is not true. I have raised this in a number of debates. The interesting thing in relation to changing previous legislation is that Poland is now introducing legislation to reverse its previous reforms. Its Government clearly realised that they had got it wrong, just as this Government have got it wrong.

Owen Smith: Poland has realised that it had moved too fast. France has done the same, as has Germany. Countries across Europe, Governments across Europe—including right-wing Governments in parts of Europe—have acknowledged that they made a mistake and are backtracking. Only this Government refuse to acknowledge any mistake, and refuse to acknowledge that they have any culpability or responsibility.

This issue will not go away, and when the Minister stands at the Dispatch Box in a moment, he should offer a glint of sunlight and some hope for the WASPI women that the Government have heard their campaign and will do something about it. If the Government do not, I will urge all Back-Bench Members to do so on their behalf.

2.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) has just made a speech more of politics than of substance. Given that he has declared himself a contender in the event of a Labour leadership
Mr Vara: If the hon. Gentleman is so proud of what the Labour Government did, why does he stand up to complain? They obviously did very little, and it must have had very little impact, because otherwise we would not be hearing the comments that Labour Members are making today.

Mr Vara: EU law does require us to equalise pension ages. Later in my speech, I will mention countries that have already achieved what we are still endeavouring to achieve. Incidentally, the shadow Secretary of State was wrong in what he said about Germany. Germany has already achieved equalisation.

Helen Jones: The hon. Gentleman ought to recognise that although EU law requires the equalisation of pension ages, it also allows for transitional arrangements while reaching that stage. Frankly, it is disingenuous to suggest otherwise.

Mr Vara: I will come to transitional arrangements a little later on.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): There are women in Northumberland who are likely to be in serious financial difficulty as a result of these changes. It will not be most of those affected, but it will be a few. My concern is for that small number of women. I would be most grateful if the Minister would agree to meet me and other Government Members to look at the small group of women who face such financial pressures.
Mr Vara: Ministers are always pleased to have meetings with colleagues, and I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and others.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Vara: I want to make some progress, because I am still on my first page.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will give way, but then I want to make some progress.

Sir Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend is saying some fair things about the Opposition and they do not like it. Will he turn his mind to a fair thing that I want to say about the women who are directly affected? The issue is that people who were born within 12 months of each other can have retirement ages nearly three years apart. That is where better transitional arrangements are needed. We all know that this Government have had to put right many things that previous Governments have got wrong, but this is something we need to get right for ourselves.

Mr Vara: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. If I am allowed to make some progress, I will talk about transitional arrangements and what we are doing.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will give way later, but I wish to make some progress.

There has been much debate about this issue, and we have had several debates about it in recent weeks. It comes down to two fundamental issues. First, there have been calls to undo the 2011 pension changes. The cost of that would be more than £30 billion. Secondly, there are calls by some to go even further and unravel the 1995 pension reforms.

Helen Jones: Nobody is asking for that.

Mr Vara: Yes, there are many people, including people in WASPI, who want to unravel the 1995 reforms. It is out there on the internet for people to see, so let us not try to deny the two options that are being debated out there. I said at the outset that I was going to talk about the substance of the matter, and I will talk about both those options.

Owen Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will give way in a moment, but I wish to continue.

If we unravel the 1995 pension reforms, as many people outside this place want us to do, it would cost £77 billion up to 2020-21, and the costs would continue to accrue after that period.

Owen Smith: The Minister repeats the calumny that the WASPI women are saying, “Do not equalise pensions, and get rid of the 1995 Act.” That is exactly what the Whips’ crib sheet says, but he knows it is not true. That was one comment made by one woman among the hundreds of thousands on Facebook. It is not what WASPI said to the Work and Pensions Committee, and it is not what it said in its petition. It is not true. Will he withdraw it?

Mr Vara: I am simply speaking from my personal experience of speaking to women. There are women who have said to me that they want the restoration of the 1995 rules. Colleagues in this House have had people in their surgeries speaking of 1995. The hon. Gentleman may not have had that—he may be out of touch, but the rest of us are not. When we talk of £77 billion or even £30 billion, we are not talking about a few million pounds or a few billion pounds. In both contexts, we are talking of tens of billions of pounds. That situation is simply not sustainable.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): When the hon. Gentleman says that £30 billion was saved as a result of the 2011 changes, what he is saying is that there was a transfer from one of the poorest groups in our society, which is women in their 50s. That group of women saw the largest growth in unemployment under the coalition Government and are more likely to have to work after retirement than men. When they do so, two thirds of them work on the lowest wage levels, unlike men who work after retirement, two thirds of whom work on the highest wage levels. What does he have to say about picking the pockets of the poorest women in our society?

Mr Vara: I will address some of the points that the right hon. Lady makes, because there is a broader context to this debate, rather than simply the issue of the pension age. Given the opportunity, I would like to make some progress.

People are living longer and leading healthier lives. Of course, that is to be welcomed, but it does increase the pressure on the state pension scheme. As a Government, we have a responsibility to keep it affordable and sustainable for future generations.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) rose—

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh rose—

Mr Vara: I would like to make some progress.

The changes that have been made are important in making the state pension scheme affordable and sustainable. They also reflect the way in which men and women lead their lives now, rather than the way they led them in the 1940s. I will come back to that point later.

First, I want to tackle one issue head-on. Many hon. Members have talked about the need for transitional arrangements. I point them towards the extensive debates and discussions that took place when the legislation passed through Parliament. Let me quote Hansard from the day on which the Pensions Bill received its Second Reading in June 2011. The Secretary of State made it very clear that equalisation of the state pension age would take place in 2018. He said that “we have no plans to change equalisation in 2018, or the age of 66 for both men and women in 2020, but we will consider transitional arrangements.”—[Official Report, 20 June 2011; Vol. 530, c. 52.]

Yes, he said, “we will consider transitional arrangements.”
Four months after the Secretary of State said those words, and after he had considered the matter further, a concession or a transitional arrangement—call it what you will—was indeed considered by this House and included on Report. That transitional arrangement was worth over £1 billion and reduced the delay that anyone would experience in claiming their state pension from two years to 18 months. So when people say that transitional arrangements should have been made, I simply ask them to look back at the record, to consider what was said and to consider what was subsequently done four months later. There were transitional arrangements. They passed through the House, there was extensive debate, there was extensive engagement with the relevant stakeholders and it was done.

Mr Vara: I will address the issue of notification later.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Minister’s description of Hansard and the discussions that took place in this House was extensive, but the ladies concerned do not know about that. It is surely unreasonable to place in this House was extensive, but the ladies concerned should read people in this House who are speaking in this debate and the Minister must listen and act. That concession was made by the taxpayer, and the total cost was £1.1 billion—

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Exactly how much of that money went to the women concerned?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady needs to appreciate that the concept of dealing with pensions and money is that the concession was made—

Carolyn Harris: I know the answer. How much?

Mr Vara: That concession was made by the taxpayer—[Interruption.] It was made by the taxpayer, and the total cost was £1.1 billion—

Carolyn Harris: How much?

Mr Vara: As I have said, and I am sorry that the hon. Lady has not got the message yet, and that she does not appreciate that the time was shortened by six months—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. There is a lot of shouting out now. If the Minister wants to take an intervention, he will, but if we could stop shouting it would help us proceed with the debate.

Mr Vara: Another reason that some have called for the legislation to be revisited is that they felt that notification needs to be reconsidered. I simply do not accept that the Government have failed to make every effort to notify the women affected.

Catherine McKinnell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will not give way, as I wish to make progress.

Following the 2011 Act, we wrote to all those directly affected to inform them of the change to their state pension age. About 5 million letters were sent by the DWP and the sending of the letters to those affected was completed between January 2012 and November 2013. Letters to those whose state pension age was set by the 1995 Act only were sent between April 2009, when Labour was still in government, and March 2011, when that process was finished by the coalition Government. As a result of those efforts, in 2012 a survey by the DWP found that only 6% of
women who were within 10 years of receiving their pension thought that their state pension age was still 60.

The shadow Work and Pensions Secretary mentioned several surveys and was somewhat selective in those to which he referred. The one done by the DWP, which runs and is in charge of the pension scheme, has a fair amount of validity and, as I say, only 6% of women who were within 10 years of receiving their pension thought that their state pension age was still 60. As for the original 1995 changes to the state pension age, in 2004 nearly three quarters of those between 45 and 54 were aware of changes to women’s state pensions. Our communications campaign has focused on raising general awareness of the changes and encouraging those closest to the state pension age to get a personalised state pension statement.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and, despite the chuntering from those on the Labour Front Bench, I can assure him and everyone else that this is my question. We heard earlier from the shadow Secretary of State that he believed that the communication on this been absolutely appalling. He overlooked the fact that his own Government estimated that 75% of women had been informed. He also overlooked the fact that according to evidence to the Select Committee there were 600 mentions of the 1995 Act found in the media at that time. According to the briefing on the state pension legislation, 17 million automatic forecasts were issued by the Labour Government between 2004 and 2006—[HON. MEMBERS: “Speech!”]. Does my hon. Friend agree that although undoubtedly some women were not informed, many were?

Mr Vara: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting those facts on the record. I am, however, sorry that as he was making those points of substance, all he got was the yah-boo politics that we can expect from the Opposition. I am afraid that the truth, as anyone watching this debate at home can see for themselves, is that the Opposition do not want to know the substance or the facts. All they are interested in is the politics, but this is far too important an issue to be treated with the political naïveté with which some Opposition Members are treating it. This is an important subject and the Government are dealing with it and treating it with the seriousness it deserves.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the Minister for giving way, and he is clearly in a difficult corner, but I wonder whether he could clarify whether the Government now accept that women—well, anybody—need at least 10 years’ notification of a pension change in order to plan and prepare. If the Government now accept that, will he explain why that does not apply to this group of women?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady will be aware that Governments have to take difficult decisions at times. Considering the state of the economy and the financial position that this Government came into—she will be aware that one of her own colleagues said that there was no money left—and considering the longevity of both men and women, the Government had to take difficult decisions, as all Governments of both shades have to. This Government had to take difficult decisions and we took them because they needed to be taken.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The women of this country will be watching this debate and listening to the Minister’s comments with a mixture of concern and disappointment. He is giving us history lessons and is trying to apportion blame. We have a material problem now that the Government need to address, so he should stop looking backwards and start looking forwards, and start caring for the women of this country. This House has already said by an overwhelming majority that it wants the Government to look again at the transitional arrangements; has the Minister looked again at them, has his position changed since the last time this House debated the subject and will he tell us what his change of position is?

Mr Vara: If hon. Members did not give mini speeches in the middle of my speech, I could reach my conclusions. I will answer the hon. Gentleman’s question in due course. We cannot look at the changes to women’s state pension age in isolation without acknowledging the significant changes in life expectancy in recent years, the huge progress made in opening up employment opportunities for women and the wider package of reforms. First, on life expectancy, the reason for all these significant reforms is that people are not just living longer but are staying healthy for longer. In just a decade, the length of time for which 65-year-olds will live in good health has surged by more than a year. That is welcome news, but it puts increasing pressure on the state pension scheme, and the Government—any Government—have a duty to ensure the sustainability of the state pension system. It would have been irresponsible for this Government, or the then coalition Government, to have ignored those developments.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that all Governments have the responsibility to be fair to the people of this country? Women are affected by the goal posts moving, and the benefits that they would get at retirement age have gone as well. This is a double whammy for that group of women who have worked hard all their lives.

Mr Vara: The Government have a duty to all their citizens, and they have to take difficult decisions and perform a balancing act. It is important to bear that in mind when people are talking about spending £30 billion-plus, or £77 billion. Those are serious sums of money, and difficult decisions have to be taken to achieve that balancing act.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Vara: I will make progress. The landscape for women and employment has completely changed since the 1940s. Female employment is now at record levels, with more than 14 million women in work—a record rate of nearly 70%. The number of older women aged 50 to 64 in work is also at a record high, with over 100,000 more older women in work than this time last year. Indeed, over the past decade, women have on average stopped working later than men. In 2005, the average age was 63, and we know that more women than men would prefer to work flexibly or part-time before retiring.
Mr Kevan Jones: My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne (Catherine McKinnell) just said to the Minister that we need at least 10 years for these notifications to be brought in. Is he confirming that this group of women, some of the poorest people in the country, are paying for the planned deficit reduction? What does he say to my constituent, Jayne Manners, who is disabled and cannot make up the six years that she has lost from this scheme? What transitional help can he give her?

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman in part repeated a question that was asked earlier, and I refer him to my previous answer. I will turn to other issues later, given the opportunity to make progress with my speech.

We need a pensions system that recognises the changes that have been made, in the same way that we have responded to the need to support older workers in the labour market. We have abolished the default retirement age and extended the right to request flexible working to all employees, and we are working with businesses to encourage the employment and retention of older workers.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): On transitional funding, is it about time that the Government started tackling rich corporate tax dodgers and stopped dodging poor women pensioners?

Mr Vara: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is delighted that he was able to score his cheap political point.

Let me turn to our wider reforms. We inherited one of the most complex state pension systems in the world, and too many people did not understand what they could expect upon retiring. From April this year, we are introducing a simpler state pension that will give people a clear picture of what the state will provide so that they can build their own savings. We have a triple lock, so that pensioners will see their basic state pension go up by at least 2.5% every year, as it has since 2011. That means that from this April, pensioners will receive a basic state pension that is more than £1,100 higher a year than at the start of the last Parliament. It is important for people to look at matters in a broader context, rather than in the single-issue context that many colleagues seem to be speaking about.

Lady Hermon: I am genuinely grateful to the Minister for at long last allowing me to intervene. In response to an earlier intervention by a Conservative Member who has now left the Chamber, the Minister replied that Ministers are always happy to meet party colleagues to discuss difficult cases. Unlike the Minister for Pensions, who sits in the other place, this Minister has refused to come to Northern Ireland and meet women who were born in the 1950s and who are adversely affected by this issue. The Government know who she is, where she lives and her age, but she does not know what she can expect upon retiring. The question remains: when will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I take on board what you say, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am coming to a conclusion. I am more than happy to meet colleagues, but I am afraid the venue would have to be negotiated. It is not every day that I go to Northern Ireland, but if the hon. Lady wants a meeting with me I am more than happy to meet her here in London.

We have ensured that more people are saving for their retirement by requiring employers to enrol their staff on to a pension with our auto-enrolment scheme. In addition to those reforms, we have continued to protect and build on a range of other pensioner benefits, including a permanent increase to cold weather payments, protection of winter fuel payments, and protection of free bus passes.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will not give way. Hopefully the hon. Lady heard what Madam Deputy Speaker directed.

We are providing greater security and choice for people in retirement, while also ensuring that the system is sustainable for the future. That is a record on pensions and pensioners of which Conservative Members can be proud. Parliament has extensively debated accelerating the changes to the state pension age. We listened to all arguments for and against at the time of the Pensions Act 2011, and we made transitional arrangements.

We are far behind other countries in Europe on equalisation—Germany, Denmark, the Czech Republic and Greece have already equalised the pension age for men and women. We must look to the future, not persist in looking backwards. These changes are about putting our pensions system on a secure financial footing, rather than continuous confusion for those affected and further debate. We should build on the high levels of awareness that we already have, and continue to promote flexibility, choice and security for older people. There are no plans on the part of the Government to make policy changes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the SNP spokesperson, I will impose a four-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches. If too many interventions go on for too long, I will have to bring that down.

2.38 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Having listened to the Minister for 35 minutes, I cannot think of a time when I have been in the Chamber and felt so utterly depressed by what I have heard. 35 minutes to say absolutely nothing and to give absolutely no hope to those women who are facing pension inequality. Talk about a Government who are out of touch!

The game was given away by one of the Minister’s hon. Friends, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries), who told the Government that she is one of the ladies who are caught up in this. The Government know who she is, where she lives and her age, but she has heard nothing. Does the Minister have anything to
say to her? Absolutely nothing—just sheer contempt from this Government for the WASPI women and the WASPI campaign. He and the Government should be utterly, utterly ashamed of themselves.

A Conservative MP asked me last night, “Why are we having yet another debate on this issue?”, and I have some sympathy with his view. We should not be having this debate for the simple and straightforward reason that the Government should have acted by now to end this injustice.

Let us just remind ourselves of the fundamentals. We in the Scottish National party, I am sure along with everybody else in this Chamber, agree with pension equalisation—we are not debating that—but we do not support the unfair manner in which the changes have been made. The Government must explore options for transitional arrangements to protect retirement plans for the females adversely affected. The Minister tossed out the figure of £30 billion, but what he did not say is that that is £30 billion over the years up to 2026. Let me give him one suggestion. The Government are consulting on pension tax relief, which costs a gross £35 billion. Why do they not readjust that to give some hope and to deal with the problem that women pensioners are facing?

Richard Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will give way later, but I want to make some progress because I am aware of the time constraints.

Parliament voted unanimously on 7 January for a motion that the Government should put into place mitigation for the women affected. The Prime Minister speaks about the sovereignty of this House. Why have the Government ignored that vote? Why have they ignored the will of the House? Whose sovereignty now? They cannot ignore the will of the House at random on the legitimate demands of the WASPI people. The Government are treating this House and the people of this country with contempt. Where is parliamentary democracy?

Catherine McKinnell: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the Minister has, basically, confirmed from the Dispatch Box that this disgraceful discrimination is a price worth paying for deficit reduction?

Ian Blackford: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. The women in the WASPI campaign are paying for the failures of the economic policy of this Government.

Let me remind the House that what we have is a Conservative Government—

Richard Graham: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman did not give way earlier. I needed to correct him on a point of fact. The evidence given to the Work and Pensions—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. That is not a point of order. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) can give way if he wants to, but he does not have to.
When I think of the intransigence of the Treasury in not recognising its responsibility to do the right thing, I am reminded of a line that I am sure could be used in a school report card for the Chancellor of the Exchequer: we thought George had reached rock bottom; sadly, he has kept digging. This is one hole that the Government have to dig themselves out of. Many Conservative Members are hoping that this issue and the WASPI women are just going to go away. That is not going to happen. We will keep fighting for the WASPI women, because it is the right thing to do. The Chancellor has refused to act—the iron Chancellor in his bunker.

When we start to pay national insurance, we are entering a contract with the state to receive a pension. The Government have an obligation to meet that commitment. There has to be fairness and transparency, and that is what is lacking in this case. We are asking for the Government to put in place mitigation to reflect and recognise that the pace of the pension age increase is far too steep. It is a pity, in the week that they are entering a contract with the state to receive a pension, they are not seeing many Conservative Members keep talking about money. That is very important, but a third of the women between the age of 50 and 55 are either carers or looking after people. The other half are either carers or looking after people. The reality is—

_Graham Evans_: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm to the House whether the SNP is making a £26 billion spending commitment?

_Ian Blackford_: I never realised the Tories were so hard of hearing. I thought I made that quite clear in my earlier remarks, but I will do it again. We are asking for the Government to make clear what they will offer in mitigation for pensioners. I gave the example of the review of pension tax relief. If they can find the money for £176 billion for weapons of mass destruction, they can find the money to do the right thing for pensioners.

_John Glen_: I recognise the passion the hon. Gentleman is bringing to the debate, but I am very concerned that the WASPI campaigners will be misled and be unable to understand clearly what the SNP will commit to if it is to bring forward the amelioration it says is so necessary. If he and his party want to be taken seriously, it is incumbent upon them to have a clear, costed proposal to bring to the House today.

_Ian Blackford_: This is remarkable. The difference between our Government in Scotland and the Tory Government in London is that we have a Government who are popular and responsible. There is a very easy answer to this: give us the powers over pensions. Give us our independence and we will do the right thing for our people and rectify the wrong that has been done by the Conservative Government.

_Clive Lewis_ (Norwich South) (Lab): Conservative Members keep talking about money. That is very important, but there is another issue—fairness. Maybe you do not know, but a third of the women between the age of 55 and 59 do not work. Do you know why they do not work? Because they have ill health or are disabled. The other half are either carers or looking after people. The reality is—

_Graham Evans_: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you remind the House of the rules about Members making contributions when they were not in the Chamber at the beginning of the debate?

_Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel)_: The hon. Gentleman has been in and out of the Chamber. He was here at the beginning of the debate. May I use this opportunity to calm things a little bit, so we can move on? A very large number of Members want to speak. If Members make interventions, please keep them short. May I also remind Members that they are speaking through the Chair? When they say “you” they are addressing the Chair, not hon. Members.

_Ian Blackford_: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I very much agree with the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), who makes very good points. It is all about unfairness to women who are really struggling, women with ill health and women who cannot work; and it is about the Government accepting their responsibilities.

_Several hon. Members rose—_

_Ian Blackford_: I have already taken a lot of interventions and I am aware that many Members want to speak, so I shall try to get through my points as quickly as I can.

Let me deal with the real case of women born in the early 1950s. This is something I have said before, but it needs repetition. Let us talk about women born on 10 February and let us look at the different experiences as they apply to each of the years of the early 1950s. Someone born on 10 February 1950 would have retired by age 60 in 2010. Women born a year later, however, would have had to wait almost two years longer to have retired on 6 January 2012. A woman born on 10 February 1952 would have reached state pension age on 6 January 2014, aged 61 years, 10 months and 27 days. Such a woman has had to wait an additional two years in comparison with a woman born in 1950.

If that were not bad enough, the increase for women born in 1953 and 1954 gets much worse. Someone born in 1953 would have retired in January this year, aged nearly 63, whereas a woman born in 1954 will not reach pensionable age until 6 July 2019, when she will be aged 65 years, four months and 26 days. A woman born in 1954 has to wait two and a half years longer for their pension than someone born a year earlier. We should dwell on that point.

_Patricia Gibson_ (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):_ Does my hon. Friend agree that as this plays out to the public, many women in the WASPI campaign who are watching our proceedings today, no doubt with huge disappointment, will be even more disappointed to see that the Tory Benches are populated almost exclusively by men, who are explaining why women born in the 1950s should not be able to access their pension? [Interruption.] I said “almost exclusively”. They are watching these detached, remote, middle-aged men explaining why they cannot access their pensions.

_Ian Blackford_: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. We should all, whether we be men or women, reflect on the unfairness. It is an issue that we should see as simply wrong, and we should deal with it, whether we be male or female.
[Ian Blackford]

Let us dwell on the point. Someone born in 1953 has now retired, while someone born in 1954 has to wait until 2019. Where is the fairness in that? Let me ask Conservative Members who among them is going to defend it. I ask a Minister, a Back Bencher or any Conservative to rise to defend what the Government are doing. Why should some people have to wait so long?

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman seriously believe, given that my constituents in Blackpool North and Cleveleys want me to be here, that I should leave the Chamber and not participate in the debate because I am a man?

Ian Blackford: I am sorry to hear that approach taken by the hon. Gentleman. I was looking for someone to defend the Government. I provided the opportunity for a Conservative Member to do so, and the hon. Gentleman failed. Everyone in this Chamber has the right to defend the interests of their constituents—we would all support that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I want to make some progress.

We shall see whether the House divides on the motion later, but Tory Back Benchers may well meekly trot through the Lobbies and do nothing other than support the Government over an issue that is, in our view, completely untenable. This is a debate, so I ask Conservative Members whether they will defend the Government. I will happily give way to any Tory Member who is prepared to stand up for the WASPI women in this country.

Nadine Dorries: I point out that we would like to speak in the debate when the opening speeches are over.

Ian Blackford: To defend what the Government are doing is to defend the indefensible. It is wrong; it is mean-spirited. Conservative Members should not just troop through the Lobbies without reflecting on the situation of women who in some cases are losing tens of thousands of pounds of their entitlement.

I have talked so far about women born up to 1954. A woman born in 1955 will not retire until 10 February 2021, aged 66 years. That cannot be right. It is far too steep an increase over a short period, and the Government must put mitigation in place. You Government Members should examine your consciences. You will have women from the WASPI campaign coming to see you—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The hon. Gentleman is speaking through the Chair. When he says “you”, he is speaking to me, but I am not directly participating in the debate. I would be grateful if he would address his comments in the third person.

Ian Blackford: I apologise most sincerely for my oversight, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will make sure it does not happen again.

Conservative Members will have women from the WASPI campaign coming to their surgeries. Let us look at what some of the woman affected have said about their real-life experiences of these changes. Here is one example:

“My husband and I got married in 1974, he is 12 years older than me. I like to think we planned life in the right way. The pension law has put all our plans out the window. I had been planning all my available options, when my husband retired, and in 2011, I requested my state pension forecast. It stated that if I deferred till 2020 I should receive a £14,621 lump sum. I thought this may allow me the option to work two days and still enjoy my family, but thanks to the change, I will not longer receive it. Also, I hadn’t anticipated that my age might make me a prime candidate for redundancy. Losing my job in 2014, was a massive blow. The government may have changed the law, but it turns out many industries don’t want 60+ women. They are effectively retiring us, and forcing us to use our lifetime savings on daily living costs, as no one wants to hire us!”

There are so many points to dwell on there, but most importantly, it speaks of the crushing of so many hopes and dreams.

It is also the case that many women are being forced to work on beyond their expected retirement date, and this brings its own challenges in terms of the availability of suitable employment, and many are sadly experiencing ill health. What has been the response of the Government? It is that other benefits are available. What a response! You have worked hard, paid your dues to society, met your side of the bargain in paying national insurance and expected to receive a pension, yet this callous, heartless Government are ripping that contract up and telling folk to claim benefits. Is that really the answer? You can get means-tested benefits, which will cost the Exchequer, but you are being denied what is rightfully yours. Welcome to “Osborne’s Britain”—callous, cold and undignified.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Is not the crux of the issue that we see a clear breach of contract? If this were a private pension company that unilaterally changed the pension conditions of 2.6 million ladies in this country, this House would quite rightly be up in arms. Those ladies want only to have that contract mitigated fairly. Surely the Government should listen to the 2.6 million ladies in this country, and act now.

Ian Blackford: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes a very good point. We were talking earlier about the Financial Conduct Authority and consumer protection, yet here are consumers being ripped off by their own Government, who are ripping up entitlements to the state pension. Conservative Members should be up in arms over this; they should defend the rights of their constituents.

Let me provide just one other example, as I am conscious of the time. Here it is:

“My husband will be 78 by the time I can retire. I had been looking forward to slowing down at 60 and enjoying putting my family, husband, children and grandchildren at the centre of my life. In Cameron’s speech on why families matter in 2014 he stated that he wanted to do ‘everything possible to help support and strengthen family life in Britain today’. Had I been available for my grandchildren, my daughter and her husband would not have had to pay £1700 a month for her two children to go to nursery, putting them in debt. They are both teachers and could not manage their mortgage on one salary. As you can see the changes I no longer receive this, to the state pension have not supported or strengthened our family, the changes have left us in a state of disarray”—all thanks to this Conservative Government. That is the reality.

As I sum up—[Interruption.] Well, I could quite happily go on! What are Conservative MPs going to say to women who are going to have to wait six years longer
than anticipated for their pension? This is a breach of trust between the Government and the women who have earned the right to a pension. We should recall the advice from the Turner report that such measures should be brought in over a 15-year period to mitigate the impact of any such changes.

We have heard about the failure of communication, which it could be argued means that the start of the 15-year process should be the beginning of the changes in 2010. That means there will effectively be a retirement age of 63 for women as of April this year. The Government could, for example, look at smoothing the increase in pensionable age for women to 2025. The Government should do the right thing and immediately introduce mitigation. Now is the time to act; if not, we will be coming back to this place and fighting for the women who deserve our protection.

2.59 pm

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I rise—finally—to express disappointment—huge disappointment. This has not been a good debate so far, and I imagine that many of the WASPI women who have been watching it on television may have switched off long ago, because the party political point-scoring on all sides has been pretty embarrassing.

Real women are affected by this, and have real issues. It is a fact that in 1995, following the first legislative change, the Labour party had 13 years during which it did not act: it did not inform women. It is also a fact that my own party has failed women in terms of communication. As for the Scottish National party, it was not even here. So yes, there have been failures on both sides of the House. I stand here as a WASPI woman, and I have received no communication whatsoever. It is not true to say that women have been informed. It is also not true to say that there has been a wide campaign of advertisements and information on this subject. The campaign of advertisements and information was about general pension changes; it did not specifically target the group of women who have been so badly affected.

What I want to talk about—during the very few minutes that I have left, after all the party political point-scoring—are the issues that are really affecting those women. I am going to use some words that will probably make the men cringe. Many people will think that I should not talk about such matters in the House. The fact is, however, that many women, when they reach a certain age, have health issues that men do not have to deal with. None of that is taken into consideration. If I had been here when the equalisation of the pension age was about to be introduced, I would not have supported it, because women have to deal with issues later in life that men simply do not have to deal with. Women are carers, and women in their fifties and sixties are more likely to be carers than women of any other age. It is a fact that 47.7% of breast cancer diagnoses are given to women in their fifties and sixties. Those are the real issues faced by the women out there who are affected by this legislation.

What do we say to the woman who has had breast cancer, has had 10 courses of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and who has now been told that she cannot retire when she thought she was going to, but has to go back to work when she is half the weight she has been at any time in her life, and is sick, and is facing worse diagnoses in the future? What do we say to women who have lost their insurance and have been blitzed with one issue after another because of their illness? There are women like that in my constituency. There is a woman in my constituency who was told by the Department for Work and Pensions that she should have been sent a letter, that in fact she had been sent a letter, and that she was telling lies. She now lives in the house that she was born in.

These women are facing dreadful problems. They are spending hours on the telephone, trying to find out from the DWP how they are affected and what is going to happen to them. Those are the complaints that women are making. It is not about who should have done what and when, it is not about which party is to blame, it is not about who is at fault; it is about the problems that these women are facing. This is what they want, and this is what I would ask of the Minister if he had the grace to listen to my speech, as I listened to his, rather than talking to his neighbour on the Front Bench. What I would like the Minister to do, on behalf of those women, is to stand at the Dispatch Box today and make a commitment that, at the very least:

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

3.3 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Women who work for fair transitional pension arrangements have been accused by some of being emotional. There is certainly one emotion that unites most of them, and that is anger: anger about the incompetence and stubbornness that have failed to address these issues over many years, and anger about the fact that the arrangements that they made for their retirement were based on either wrong information or no information at all from the Government, and have now been overturned.

Who are the women most affected? Many of them are carers; one lady who wrote to me is caring for a mother in her nineties. Others are women who have had to retire early because of ill health. Yet others are women who have been made redundant in their late fifties and early sixties, and there were a lot of those under the coalition Government. All of them thought that they could just about manage until their state pensions kicked in, only to find that the Government had moved the goalposts, a fact of which they had been totally unaware.

These are also women who have been disadvantaged throughout their working lives. Many of them started work before the Equal Pay Act 1970, and certainly before the cases involving equal pay for work of equal value. Many brought up their children when there was very little childcare, and a number had to take low-paid part-time jobs to fit in with their children’s school hours. As for those who gave up work to look after their children, they were, at that time, given no pension credits for their caring responsibilities, and when they went back to work they found themselves without enough time to build up a decent private pension. Many women have now found themselves redundant, but are being kept in the workforce and put through the Work programme as if they were workshy layabouts, although they have worked all their lives.
Ministers ought to hang their heads in shame for the way they have treated these women. It is not enough, apparently, for this Government to damage women’s prospects in every Budget they have introduced and make them bear the biggest burden of cuts; they also have to damage their retirement prospects—and this is the Government who tell us that they are on the side of strivers. Not if those strivers are women, they aren’t. They have put nearly 2.5 million women in an impossible position. So contemptuous of those women are they that the Secretary of State does not even come here to respond to debates. No doubt he is out fabricating some new fantasy about how our security is threatened by countries like Belgium and Luxembourg, those well-known bellicose nations.

However, the real culprit, whom we have never seen at all, is the Chancellor. Like Macavity the Mystery Cat, whenever there is trouble, he is not here. It is he who decided that women should bear an unfair burden of the cuts. It is he who has made sure that they are paying the price for this Government’s policies. In future, Ministers should listen. They should come to the Dispatch Box with more than the platitudes that we have heard before from this Minister—

**Dr Huq:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Helen Jones:** I am sorry; I do not have time.

Ministers should come here and introduce transitional arrangements for these women. They have been the backbone of this country for years, many of them are saving us millions by caring for others, and they have been treated with gross unfairness and contempt by this Government.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** Given that a great many Members want to speak, it would be helpful if Members did not intervene, because if they want to make speeches later, we shall be in an impossible position. If Members could shave just a little bit off their speeches, I shall try to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak.

3.8 pm

**Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I shall do my utmost, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am embarrassed to be in the Chamber today, because this debate has shamed us all. I am deeply, deeply disappointed by what I have heard. I came here today to speak on behalf of the constituents I have met who are affected by this issue. I wanted to speak about their financial security, about why it matters to them, and about why they want to be resilient and protected from unexpected shocks.

All those I have met have been both reasonable and very frustrated. Some have been intensely angry, and understandably so. I have no doubt that more could have been done by all parties to improve communication. I am sorry that the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) is laughing at me. I wish that she would not laugh at me. This is not a laughing matter. I am desperately trying to explain that I think more needs to be done on behalf of the people affected. We can review what has been done by way of communication, but that will not help those individuals.

I wanted to look carefully at what WASPI is calling for, because of the strength of their campaign. Their petition is quite clear: it calls on the Government to put all women in their 50s...and affected by the changes to the state pension age in exactly the same financial position they would have been in had they been born on or before 5 April 1950.

My understanding, and I ask to be corrected by WASPI members themselves if I am wrong, is that that would effectively mean the restoration of the state pension age to 60 for that cohort of women. If that is the case, it is a perfectly valid argument to make, but one I cannot agree with because the cost would be too great for the Exchequer to bear.

That does not mean that the answer is that we should do nothing. There are many ways of looking at what the transitional arrangements could be. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who called for mitigation and transitional arrangements, but I was not clear what they amounted to. When I have had debates in the Chamber with the shadow Secretary of State, I have always found him to be a very reasonable man. From the first time we met to discuss epilepsy, I have always had a high regard for him. He came up with six options, some of which are mutually exclusive, and none of which had a price tag. Nor did he select a particular preference. However, I thought it was a useful starting point.

I urge Members on both sides of the House to take account of this point: the more information we have, the more we can start to select which are the most appropriate methods to make progress. What problem are we trying to solve here? What are the most proportionate means of solving it? Not all those six options will address all the concerns that have been expressed to me. Some may be too costly, some may not, but we should be open to that information. The more the options can be costed, the better.

I want to make another point to WASPI. In its evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, it perhaps made an error of judgment in that it appeared to rule out the prospect of any use of either means-tested benefits or other pensioner benefits to adjust for some of the problems that people face. That was a mistake, because there is potential to discuss how, once people are in receipt of their pension, some way could be found to mitigate or adjust for the impact. The age at which people can claim could be brought forward, but the amount that they claim reduced. I hope that we can also look at whether the changes need to be universal or could be means-tested. Many of my most vulnerable pensioners—my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) made this point clear—are going to be the least well off. I therefore hope we can start to have a wider debate.

3.12 pm

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I start by offering you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the House my apologies, because unfortunately I will not be able to be here for the winding-up speeches—I am on Front-Bench duty in Westminster Hall from 4 o’clock. No discourtesy is intended either to the shadow Minister or the Minister who will be closing the debate.

As always, it is a pleasure to take part in the debate, although I am a little saddened by the Minister’s response to what is a fairly clear motion tabled by the Labour
Front-Bench team. We are calling on the Government to set out a process of transitional arrangements for the group of women affected, who have been served a real injustice. I am not concerned about the where, the who, how or what. When my kids are squabbling, they get put on the naughty step; I am not bothered about the who, why, where or what. We are where we are, as the WASPI women appreciate. The real injustice is that they have been denied fair transitional arrangements.

When we were discussing the pension scheme for Members of Parliament, we put in place, I accept through an independent system, a 10-year transitional arrangement, so that right hon. and hon. Members who were within 10 years of their normal retirement age were able to remain on the old House of Commons system, and the rest of us were moved on to the new IPSA system. I say to the Minister that if it is good enough for us, it is good enough for those women, and they deserve the freedom to have enough time to make alternative arrangements. Those were the arguments that were made when our pension changes came before us. There should not be one rule for us and one rule for people outside this Chamber. I argue, reasonably, that they should expect the same treatment that we expected when there were changes to our pension system.

I realise that the Minister currently sitting on the Front Bench is not the Pensions Minister; the Pensions Minister is in the other place. I have to say, being kind to the Minister, who seemed tetchy in his response, that the fact that he was not the Pensions Minister probably showed. I will tell him what the WASPI women are calling for—I quote from their petition:

“The Government must make fair transitional arrangements for all women born on or after 6th April 1951 who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age”.

They are not asking for changes to legislation; they are asking for fairness. That brings me back to the motion we call on the Government to set out a process of transitional arrangements for those women, because they deserve fairness. That is why we called for this debate. I commend the shadow Secretary of State for securing it, because it allows us to have a vote and to show these women that we mean what we say.

3.16 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate. I rise to represent the views of Linda Anderson and others from the WASPI campaign group in Salisbury who came to see me just last week. It was clear from their representations that they feel a grave sense of injustice. They have had different experiences in what they have received over the years and in their understanding of the different entitlements they should have had, but I too have been disappointed by the lack of clarity in the alternatives that have been presented in this debate. We had a powerful speech by the SNP Front-Bench spokesman, but we did not have clarity or costings on the amelioration that his party proposes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) said, the Opposition spokesman offered a menu of options, but we did not have any price tags and we did not have any choices.

I want to set out what I would do and say how much it would cost, because it is important that we have some integrity in addressing the campaigners who have come to see all of us. There has been far too much emotive talk from people trying to get alongside the WASPI campaigners by saying, “It is my party that will do something about this”, and making grave accusations about a Government who have made significant changes to raise pensioners’ standard of living and to put in place mechanisms to ensure that changes in life expectancy are reflected in the provision that the Government make for senior citizens.

It is clear that the pathway to equalisation was set a long time ago, and that there was some communication after the legislation was passed in 1995, but I want to go back to the Work and Pensions Committee report in 2004. There is no ambiguity in what that report said about the Omnibus survey of women in 2004 aged 45 to 54. That survey found that 73%—nearly three quarters—of those women were aware of the changes. That was 12 years ago. I say that not to deflect from the sense of injustice of the WASPI campaigners but to suggest that there has been a range of experiences and different levels of awareness of the changes. It is therefore difficult to get absolute clarity on who knew what when.

However, there does seem to be a real injustice for that group of people, who are now very near their pensionable age, or what they thought would be their pensionable age, which has now been extended. Their lifestyle will be compromised. Their partners or husbands are often already retired, and there will be grave implications for their quality of life. So what I propose is that the group of pensioners in that early-50s cohort are given the option to take their pension earlier. Their pension would be reduced, but it would be a relatively small amount for two or three years, and it should be cost-neutral to the Government even taking into account the cost of the administrative changes involved. That is a reasonable approach, because it says, “There’s a good chance that three quarters of you will have heard about this, but if you didn’t, this option exists.” I urge the Front-Bench team to consider that and come back at the end of the debate with its response.

3.19 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate because I have heard in so many cases how the changes brought in by the Pensions Act 2011 affect the lives of millions of women born throughout the 1950s. They are unfairly bearing the burden of the personal costs of the Government’s increases to the state pension age, because many find themselves without a job, without a pension or pensioner benefits, and without money to live on, and that must focus our minds. Many of the 1950s-born women affected by the changes are living in real financial hardship.

In our last debate on this, I asked the Minister where the work or suitable support is for women affected by the state pension age increases that his Government have brought in. There are 2.6 million women born in the 1950s affected by the Government’s changes, but finding suitable employment in our 60s is not the same as looking for work in our teens and 20s. The experience of my constituents is that suitable work or support programmes do not exist. These facts were known about in 2011 when the legislation went through.
The Minister was pilloried even by MPs of his own party when he read out a list of benefits available to 1950s-born women affected by the Government’s changes. I say to the Minister that he does not realise what it means to have to go to a jobcentre or to be pushed on to the Work programme or to have an assessment for ESA. My constituents have told me how they feel about having to go to jobcentres; they feel there is no dignity in having to do that as women in their 60s, after a lifetime of working, bringing up children, and paying national insurance contributions for 40 years or more. One of my constituents told me she was pleased they had taken her off ESA “because it is making me ill to keep dealing with them... the way you are dealt with.”

I have a constituent who is forced to attend the Work programme. She feels that it fails to take into account her previous experience, which is a very common feeling. She is worried about being “parked” on a programme where she has to work for free or face sanctions.

WASPI campaign supporters have shared other stories about poor practice by Work programme providers when working with 1950s-born women. One 62-year-old woman with a full work history has reported being escorted by staff of the provider Seetec around a shopping centre with a CV to make speculative applications to managers in shops there, but the woman involved did not recognise her CV because it had been changed by the Work programme provider to disguise her age by removing her date of birth and full work history. That raises legal issues as such misrepresentation can make an employment contract void, but putting them aside we see that the Government’s acceleration of state pension age changes is pushing some women who become unemployed into such situations.

Women affected have described the whole process as “degrading”, being “frogmarched” with a falsified CV around a shopping centre and constantly under observation. It was also humiliating for women on this programme when the same provider offered inappropriate incentives such as sweets or chocolates to “encourage” the women to apply for jobs. Women fear they will be subject to sanctions if they refuse to participate.

We should be ashamed to have a system that treats women born in the 1950s in this way when they have worked all their lives. I have asked before why the Government have not considered different schemes to support people in their 60s. The Government have changed the situation and they should do that. Why have they not looked at a bridge pension scheme, or changing the situation and they should do that. Why have they not looked at a bridge pension scheme, or offering concessionary travel, or winter fuel payments?

Throughout their lives, 1950s-born women have been disadvantaged in terms of pay and pensions. They deserve better after a lifetime of work than being frogmarched around shopping centres or offered sweets to fill in job applications. They deserve proper consideration of a lifetime of work and NI contributions: they deserve fair transitional arrangements.

I support this motion, opportunistic though it is, and it gives me no pleasure to say that I will have to vote against the Government, which is not something I make a habit of. I will do so out of loyalty to WASPI, out of support for transitional arrangements which I agree with, and because legislation needs to be fair and proportionate, and these pension changes are unfair and have fallen disproportionately on a small number of women.

Never in my time in the House have I ever known there to be a debate on the same subject five times in the space of just two months; it has been unprecedented. There was standing room only in Westminster Hall in the last debate.

I welcome the six options put forward by the shadow Front Bench. They are fraught with problems, but they are a starting point, and the one thing the Government have not done is come up with some options and offer to help to model them. I hope and ask for a dialogue and that we may have detail and definition. There is genuine cross-party support for getting this problem sorted out. The problem is not going to go away, as we have said before. I ask the Minister to agree that the Secretary of State will meet a cross-party delegation of hon. Members with key members of the WASPI campaign and—with the help of civil servants—cost some possible models and give their implications, so at least we can have some facts about how impractical or practical some of these things might be. That would be a helpful way forward.

Given the time, I just want to read from a couple of letters from constituents that speak much more eloquently than I could. One of them is from a lady who said:

“2 years before I was due to retire at 60 I found out that I had to wait till I was 66. Like many other women, not exactly what I had planned for. In fact when I started work at 15 I was always going to work till I was 60, so everything was planned for that time…

I come from a family who believed in work, to save for the future and be independent. Despite being widowed at 22, and left with a small baby, I never accepted handouts, the only thing I had was child benefit. As a single mother, I worked and supported my son for 6 years—no tax credits. I was lucky enough to remarry when my son was 7 but still continued to work and be independent financially, which was important to me…Unfortunately after 2 bouts of cancer I finally had to stop working when I was in mid-50s, and much against my ethos, had to claim incapacity benefit, but was again reassured that after 5 years I would receive my pension. So it was a complete shock that 2 years before I was due to receive it I find I will not get it till I am 66—if I live that long!”

Another constituent writes:

“I have worked as a nurse for 40 years, presently as a Macmillan Cancer Specialist.

When I was young, I believed that my Government would look after me when I reached retirement age of 60, and I believe they had a contract with me which they have now broken, as I will be 65 years and 9 months old when I receive my State pension.

This will cause me hardship as I grow older, and after working many years in the NHS, I really feel let down. My pension age has been changed twice, and I cannot believe that a woman born 2 years before me already receives her pension.”

Another lady ended up after making a similar impassioned plea saying:

“It seems that we older women who have contributed to society are considered unimportant and not worth the financial support that we have earned over the years.”
I agree. We need to send out a very strong message to those women that we do care, and that there has been a disproportionate effect from perfectly well-intentioned changes to the pension age. Nobody disagrees with equalisation—nobody says that we need to go back to a pre-1995 level—but there is a deal to be done and a compromise to be reached. Common sense needs to break out and the Government need to listen to those on both sides of this House and to these women, because we value them and they have been affected most disproportionately by well-intentioned changes. I hope that the Minister will take away that message and that we will now be able to open a dialogue, because we are talking about real women facing real hardship after hard-working lives, when they were doing the sort of thing we encourage our constituents to do every day of the week.

3.28 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Today, we again debate the need for transitional arrangements following the equalisation of the state pension age. Contrary to what the Minister said, everyone—including the women affected—accepts the equalisation of the state pension age for men and women in principle. However, in practice it is clear that these changes have had such a detrimental effect on the lives of a particular group of women born in the 1950s—many thousands of them up and down the country—that we must look at transitional arrangements. We can ignore this no longer.

Like many others in the Chamber today, I have had many women from WASPI contact me at my surgeries, or via email or social media, to raise their concerns about the impact that the lack of transitional arrangements will have on their lives. In recent weeks and months, we have had many debates on this important matter, yet time and again the Government have failed to move an inch in their position and have continued to ignore the concerns of these women.

The common theme of all the many letters I have received from constituents has been that the escalation in the equalisation of the state pension age has ruined these women's plans, savings and, in some cases, lives. One constituent’s case stands out in particular. She was born in 1957. I will not name her, but she explained to me that she saw these changes mentioned on the news a few times but as she never received a letter, she assumed they must not affect her, as she would surely have been told if they did. She eventually received a letter in 2014. She thought it was a routine pension calculation, but it showed her state pension age as taking effect in 2023. She thought it must be an error and was horrified later to discover that it was not. What that meant for her was that instead of retiring next year, as expected and as she planned for, she has to work a further six years. She is in very bad health and could just about envisage coping until next year, when she thought her state pension age applied. However, upon the realisation of the enormity of this information and what it meant to her and her life; her health rapidly deteriorated. She became severely depressed and required medication, and I would hazard that she may never be the same again.

No one here has a magic wand, not even the Minister, and none of us can turn back time, but just for a second, can the Minister put himself in that lady’s position? Imagine being that lady and finding out that news in that way—imagine how that would feel and imagine the shock? We—this institution, this Parliament—did that. Lots of us were not MPs in 1995, but some of us were in 2011, and the laws of the land that we make here affect people out there. Was it not our duty to ensure that these women, to whom we were about to deliver this great life-altering shock, at least knew about it? Should we not have ensured that they knew when they heard it on the news that it did indeed affect them, not because they had researched the small print themselves, but because the Department for Work and Pensions wrote to them and personally told them in good time, not as late as 2014? Surely that was the least the DWP should have done and we, Parliament, should have insisted upon it.

As I have said, we cannot turn back time and we cannot wave the magic wand that a lot of people think we have, because we do not have one—it does not exist. But we can do something today: we can insist that the Government do something. The Minister must go away and draft, with haste, transitional arrangements for this group of WASPI women who have been failed by the system and failed by these changes. We cannot fail them today. Parliament is at its best when using its powers for the good of its people. Parliament is speaking very clearly today to the Government. It is saying, “Go away, sort this out and bring forward transitional arrangements so that these women are not left destitute in what should have been their well-earned retirement.”

3.32 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Nobody in this House can doubt the sincerity of the WASPI campaign or the number of women who have signed the petition, but as this is the fifth debate, we should start with what has changed since the last one. Today’s motion is all about bringing forward “transitional arrangements”, and those are the precise words used on the WASPI campaign’s petition. They sound fairly harmless, but what are these transitional arrangements?

In the last debate, the shadow Pensions Minister, who is in her place, included a specific proposal—a perfectly reasonable one—about extending pension credit. However, that had been specifically ruled out by WASPI spokeswomen in evidence to the Select Committee. Today, the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, like the Scottish National party spokesman, talked passionately about doing the right thing, but they did not say what that was, what their commitment is or what their parties would do if they were ever in the position—in some cases, that is unlikely—of actually being responsible for the finances of the pension arrangements for the United Kingdom. There is a serious danger of Opposition Members, in their sympathy for the cause of the WASPI campaign, leading these women up the garden path—encouraging them with sympathy but giving no commitment whatsoever.

It is important that the House understands for what these women are mainly asking. It is exactly as I spelled it out from their Facebook page in the last debate. It is to ask for “all women born in the 50s”—to be—

“in the same financial position they would have been in had they been born on or before…April 1950.”
That is their main ask and it would reverse the 1995 Act in important ways. What would that cost? Since the last debate, the Department for Work and Pensions has provided data to the Select Committee, showing that the cost is much, much greater than any of us imagined. There would be an immediate cost of £29 billion in 2016-17—bigger than the entire budget for Scotland. The total cost up to 2020 alone would be £77 billion.

When I discuss this issue with my wife and my sisters and others born in the 1950s and I explain to them that pensions are paid every year not out of some magic protected pot called national insurance, but out of general taxpayer-provided revenue paid by the next generation—our children and our grandchildren—none of them believes that that cost of £77 billion is remotely practicable.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) Will my hon. Friend give way?

Richard Graham: I had better not.

That is why the Opposition will never make that proposal or agree to it under any circumstances. The question is whether any other arrangements are possible. The other potential arrangements are being considered by the Select Committee in a report on the new state pension Act, which will include a section specifically on the WASPI campaign. Members should wait until that report has come out—it will be only about three weeks from now—and the conclusions may be seen and studied by everyone, and then they will see the real impact and the real cost of some of the suggestions that have been made today.

We should be clear about this: the WASPI campaign is genuine and it is principled. Its members care passionately. They feel that they have been badly treated, but this House has an obligation not to mislead them and pretend that things will be done when they will never be done. That is why the main ask is not possible.

3.36 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Sometimes a campaign captures the mood of this nation, and the WASPI campaigners have done just that. Like so much of this Government’s agenda, the speed of the transition arrangements for women’s state pensions betrays a rush to pinch pennies at too great a human expense, but the WASPI women have stung back—even more so than other groups that have been hit hard by austerity—and the wave of public support for their cause speaks volumes.

We have a strong tradition of equality campaigning in this country. I think of the Suffragettes and their determination to given women a voice whatever the cost; the Chartists and their drive for universal suffrage and a fairer deal for working people; and the Ford Dagenham workers and their demand for equal pay for equal work. I think, too, of Stonewall and its tireless challenging of homophobia in law, schools and the workplace; and the Fawcett Society and its provocative challenge that, “This is what a feminist looks like.” Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, let me say, “This is what a feminist looks like.” Each of those campaigns was driven by anger at injustice; anger at unfairness; and anger at the unreasonable of those in positions of power to listen to a reasonable case.

As we have heard, moving the goalposts on state pension age equalisation so rapidly is the latest affront to a generation of women whose working lives have already been too challenging. This is a generation of women who had patchy access to maternity leave and fair pay; who had no access to shared parental leave; who often experienced harassment, bullying and discrimination in the workplace; and who regularly settled for low-paid, low-skilled jobs beneath their potential, because quality flexible working was not then an option for them. They are the generation of women who account for too few seats in the boardroom and for too few positions in industries such as engineering and construction; who finished their working lives earning significantly less than their male counterparts; and who have paid their dues and deserve a decent retirement. They deserve, at a minimum, to be able to plan their retirement with the certainty and the expectation that others have.

It is right that the retirement age for the state pension should be the same for men and women. The WASPI campaign does not dispute that, but the pace of this change has robbed people of the time to prepare; the time to make informed decisions; and the time to honour other commitments without placing themselves in financial jeopardy. All those things have been robbed from the WASPI campaigners. Reasonable decisions about their family futures have been lost to a forced hand. More than 3,800 of my constituents are believed to be affected by this legislation—more than 5% of my electorate. Of those, a considerable 2,000 will experience a year’s increase to state pension age, and as many as 450 will experience the full 18-month delay. Several of them have contacted me to express their concerns. They include Gail Jones of Hyde and Barbara Evans of Mossley. They are women who have contributed to both the Exchequer and their communities throughout their lives, and they are now being short-changed.

This Government have at times proven that they can acknowledge when they have misjudged a policy by retracting from their attempts to cut tax credits and to make further cuts to police numbers. The cynics among us would say that that tends to happen when the Chancellor feels it will affect his career prospects, but it is still the case that the Government have on occasions performed a U-turn. I trust that on this occasion the Minister will finally listen to the strength of feeling of Labour Members and indeed of those on both sides of the House, but especially to the passionate appeals by the WASPI campaigners, and agree to revisit the arrangements. Let us respect those women who have contributed so much to both the national purse and the national fabric.

I hope that when the Minister comes to sum up, he will show from the Dispatch Box today that he is what a feminist looks like and will pledge to think again.

3.40 pm

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): This has been an interesting debate. Parts of it have been quite poor, but it is clearly of great interest to many of our constituents.

Many of us came into politics to do the right thing and to look after the right sorts of people. I joined the Conservative party because I wanted to ensure that
people who do the right thing, go out to work and save for their future are protected and looked after in their old age. It runs deep through the Conservative party that we should look after those who have been out there and worked hard, or those who have stayed at home, looked after their children and made sure their children set off on the right path.

Today’s debate has been a sad reflection on women who find themselves in difficult circumstances. We had to listen to 30 minutes from the Labour Front Bench of blatant party politicking about the issues and the challenges we face, without a single commitment saying what the Opposition would do. They talked about six options that were available and committed to none of them. They did not say whether they would do one of those, two or all six. It is a great shame that they did not nail their flag to the mast and say what they would do if they were in the hot seat. They left us in the hot seat.

To be fair to the Blair Government, with the Pensions Act, they tried to engage with those people who found themselves in a difficult position, but they did not go far enough. They did not recognise the enormous time bomb that was coming as a result of demographic change, and they left us in 2010 with an enormous mountain to climb to solve the challenges arising from the fact that we all live longer and healthier lives. The coalition Government tried to close the gap by introducing the Pensions Act 2011.

It is extremely challenging for those who find themselves on the wrong side of the line, but a line had to be drawn somewhere so that we could move the pension age up over time. I recognise that some people find themselves in difficult circumstances. I will listen to the Minister to hear whether there are ways in which we can mitigate some of the challenges that they face. We should recognise that changes have already taken place: there has been more than £1 billion of mitigation since our time in office to try to smooth the way for those people. I am enormously sympathetic to the challenges that they face, and I shall meet some of them very soon in my constituency. This debate will continue for a long time.

3.43 pm

*Mhairi Black* (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): When I heard that we were to debate this issue again, I thought, “What am I going to talk about?” Everything is already on the record. We have already discussed how the new single tier state pension is irrelevant to the women in question and will not solve the problem. We went to great lengths to explain how nobody disagrees with equalisation and nobody is calling for Acts to be repealed.

Then I came across a document that was sent by a Conservative MP to a woman affected. On the front page it says that the Government cannot do anything because WASPI is campaigning for all women born after April 1951 to be given their state pension from the date they reach age 60. No, that is not what WASPI is asking for. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) talked about misleading people. That is misleading. Nobody is against equalisation.

On Monday I attended a media training course, where we were taught how to look at the camera, where to put our hands and so on. One of the guys taking the course said, “If you, as politicians, ever find ourselves in a difficult situation where you realise you’re in the wrong and you need to get through an interview, just start talking about what you want to talk about.” It struck me immediately that that is what this Government are doing; every single time we talk about this, they start talking about things that are completely irrelevant.

The second page of the document states: “The national insurance credits are available for many people to help them build entitlement towards state pension. National insurance payments also impact on entitlement to a range of other benefits.” Pensions are not a benefit; they are a right. One of my constituents described them as a contract, and that is exactly what they are. Let me make this very simple. Everybody here has a phone—in fact, some of us are sitting with our iPads right now—and we all have contracts for those. If O2, Virgin or Three were to change the terms and conditions of our contracts, we would have something to say about it. If they waited 14 years to tell us about those changes, we would definitely have something to say about it. If they said, on top of that, that we would be forced to live off our life savings as a result of those changes, we would be up in arms about it, and rightly so. So why are pensions any different?

We hear all the time, “Where is the money going to come from for that?” The truth is that this comes down to austerity, and it is austerity of choice. Those on the Government Front Bench can roll their eyes all they want, but this is a choice. I am yet to hear a general or a Defence Minister say, “We can’t bomb that country because we’ve exceeded our budget.” When we want to bomb Syria, we can find the money. When we want to refurbish Westminster, we can find the money. But when it comes to giving our pensioners their pensions, we cannot find the money? I just do not accept that.

This debate reminds me of the tax credits debate. We were making all these arguments about how unfair the situation was, and the Government responded with exactly the same argument: “We don’t have the money.” Then, when the heat was turned up and political pressure was put on them, all of a sudden they put their hand down the back of the couch and said, “Okay, we can afford it now, so let’s just do a U-turn,” and rightly so.

That brings me to my last point. How can we ignore the will of this House? We have debated this matter in this Chamber and voted by 158 to 0. How can we ignore that? We debated it in Westminster Hall, which was packed to the gunnels, and almost everybody who spoke was against the Government. They cannot continue to ignore the will of this House. I am no fan of Westminster—that will come as no surprise—because I think it is more about ego than it is about issue, but the truth is that even the most politically savvy minds must be able to see that this is not party political. We have a chance to come together and do something that will earn us respect. I think that the Government should take that chance and act.

3.47 pm

*Huw Merriman* (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): In the past few months I have met a number of constituents who have been impacted by these changes. They detailed how the increases in the state pension age have had an impact on them owing to their being on the wrong side of the dateline. I have every sympathy with them, and I understand their frustration.
I spoke during the Back-Bench business debate on this matter on 7 January, and I congratulated the WASPI campaign on driving the debate. Although it is true that any criteria changes regarding pensions, benefits or taxation in general are always going to have an impact on some people, I am conscious that many of the individuals we are talking about have worked for decades on the basis that they would receive their pensions at a prescribed time. However, I am also conscious that when actuaries calculated life expectancy, and therefore the number of years for which a pension would pay out, they did not expect it to reach the level that many currently enjoy, and they would not have anticipated the current rising levels of health. Those factors have driven successive Governments, and most OECD nations, to increase the pension age.

The issue I have with the motion is that it deals with legislation that was settled in previous Parliaments. It implores the use of “transitional arrangements for women adversely affected”. My understanding is that when the last set of changes were made in 2011, a transitional programme was implemented, to the tune of over £1 billion. In order to manage expectations, it would be better if the motion had recognised that changing these rules for those impacted would cost £39 billion and then outlined where the additional money would be saved in Government spending in order to pay for it to be delivered. I spoke earlier today about the need for the Government to continue to support spending on mental health provision, particularly for young people. Would that be hit? Would it be the police budget, the subject of the next Opposition day motion, which is critical about the lack of funding?

I stood on a manifesto commitment pledging the delivery of a budget surplus by 2020, which means that compensation in this matter would have to be paid for by another group of my constituents. Opposition parties also attempted to cost their commitments in their manifestos. I do not recall finding a commitment to additional money would be saved in Government spending in order to pay for it to be delivered. I spoke earlier today about the need for the Government to continue to support spending on mental health provision, particularly for young people. Would that be hit? Would it be the police budget, the subject of the next Opposition day motion, which is critical about the lack of funding?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, because it enables me to make the point that I wanted to make to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). To put this in context, if we compare the £39 billion with the approximately £120 billion annual spend on the NHS, we begin to see how difficult it is to make the sums add up. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Huw Merriman: I absolutely do. When it comes to footing the bill, I also have concerns about another age group in my constituency—those in their 20s and 30s. They are sometimes referred to as the packhorse generation because they are saddled with debts from university; which I, and many others of my age group and those older than me did not have to endure; they are less likely to be in receipt of occupational pension schemes; they are paying high rents and struggling to afford a home of their own; and they are likely to be the subject of pension changes in decades to come, if life expectancy continues to increase.

Half-measured mitigation, even if it were introduced, would reveal the next pension age group to be impacted, and we would never be able to move on. The issue of pensions is becoming increasingly vexed. Post-retirement life expectancy is undoubtedly much greater than was envisaged when pensions calculators were put in place. Additionally, with advances allowing those in their sixties to remain fit and active, many people in their sixties and beyond are working in a manner that was not envisaged when those pensions calculators were put in place.

There has been a general change in life and working-age expectancy, which we all rightly celebrate because it shows that many people are living longer and leading fitter lives in their advanced years. However, it also means that there is a funding gap, and to avoid placing a financial obligation on those in their 20s and 30s, who are struggling to get on, the country has had to revise the pension age to take into account the changes in life and work expectancy.

This is a settled matter. Until it can be explained to me which of the current spending commitments will be axed to cover the cost of this £39 billion change, I cannot support this motion.

3.52 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): It has been interesting to hear the passionate arguments on this issue. The first thing we have to point out is that this is a political decision: “You guys in government decided where the cuts would come.” We are not asking Ministers to put £39 billion in; we are saying, “Don’t take it out. Have a transitional arrangement.”

Over the last few months, people have been queuing up at my surgery. The 3,800 in Blackburn affected by this change feel that the Government have moved the goalposts; they thought they had a contract with the Government, but it seems not. These are the same women who had to give up their jobs in their early working lives. There was no such thing as maternity pay; women gave up their job and applied for it when they were ready to go back and if one was available. These are the same women who were not protected by equal pay—who earned a lot less than their male counterparts—and who were less able to join a private pension scheme. Nevertheless, these women recognised the problem and tried to fill the gap. They did not want to be a burden on society, so they made arrangements. After working 45 years, they are entitled to a pension they were promised—but it seems the Government do not think so.

The people I have spoken to feel they have been misled, misinformed and, in a number of cases, not informed at all. They feel the Government are forcing changes on them. As everyone else has said, nobody is objecting to equality. What we are objecting to is thousands of people having difficult financial circumstances imposed on them.

One of my constituents, Kath, came to see me. She was very upset. She felt frustrated that the Minister did not understand the impact the changes would have on her life. She said:
“Had I been born 12 months earlier my retirement age would have been 4 years sooner. Can that be right?”

Why is the burden of the increase falling over such a short period? That cannot be right and it is unfair—surely any intelligent person can see that. Kath has an additional problem: the DWP cannot predict her pension because for a number of years she was in an opt-out situation. Is that fair? Kath is a widow and has worked all her life in a range of jobs, from the NHS to the banking sector to self-employment. She now finds that everything she has worked for has been put on hold and she will have to struggle on for a few more years. She feels that this is a very sad state of affairs and wants to know why this Government are penalising her for working hard all her life.

Some transitional arrangements must be put in place, because women all over the country have been put in the same difficult circumstances as those in Blackburn. It is not too late for these women; it is not too late to right the wrong. Transitional arrangements should be made, and should be made now.

3.55 pm

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): The need for equalisation of the state pension age is evident. We have an ageing population. People are living healthier, longer lives, with an ever-greater proportion of the population drawing a pension while an ever-smaller proportion are contributing through national insurance. Without equalisation, the system risks becoming increasingly difficult to afford. At my help and advice surgery in Frodsham last month, a constituent of mine, Barbara, came to speak to me about this issue. Barbara is 59, turning 60 this year, and she had been expecting to retire at 62. It was not until recently that she realised she would have to wait until she was 66 to retire. The majority of the anger at these changes lies in the lack of notification.

Following the changes of 1995, the DWP issued a leaflet, among other press and publicity measures, including direct mail, to advise the public of those changes. In 2004, it ran an information campaign, distributing over 2 million pension information guides, alongside adverts in the press and women’s magazines, to complement an interactive online state pension age calculator. In addition, all state pension statements issued from 2001 included the new state pension age, as determined by the 1995 changes, as standard. Since then, over 11 million statements have been issued. Those affected by the 2011 changes were written to directly. This involved sending out more than 3 million letters between January 2012 and November 2013. I note that for those of us due to retire at 65, within the past three years the age has gone from 65 to 66, and it is now 67 for men and women born in the 1960s and onwards. Had those efforts been fully successful, however, we would probably not be here now debating this subject, and I believe that this is the fourth debate we have had on it in as many months.

The WASPI campaign has called on the Government “to put all women in their 50’s affected by the changes to their state pension in exactly the same financial position they would have been in had they been born on or before 5 April 1950.”

Those who plan towards their retirement want to live the retirement they planned for. Following the 2011 changes, the Government passed an amendment to the legislation that provided £1.1 billion of transitional funding and delayed the equalisation of the state pension age, on top of bringing the new state pension forward by a full year. However, undoing the 2011 changes would cost £30 billion, in addition to a loss of £8 billion in tax revenue, and undoing the 1995 changes would cost several times that—£70 billion plus. The new state pension, which has been brought forward by a year, will come into effect in April this year. It will see many woman significantly better off than they would have been under the old system, with £416 a year more than they would have had. Likewise, the introduction of the triple lock, which ensures that the state pension goes up by whichever is highest of inflation, wages or 2.5% means that the basic state pension will be over £1,100 higher than it was at the start of the previous Parliament.

The lesson to be learned by Governments of all colours is that of effective communication. Pensions are complicated at the best of times, and I have a huge amount of sympathy with that. I believe that it is the fault of Governments of all colours, not just the Conservative Government. WASPI women will receive an improved pension before the men and women who will now retire at the age of 67. WASPI women will live longer, on average, than men. The Government’s pension reforms are fair for those who receive them and for the younger generation who will have to pay for them.

3.59 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Usually, when somebody says to me, “So-and-so is being a bit waspy,” it is a signal to tread with some care, so when I was told that a load of women who were concerned about this issue were coming to see me at my surgery on Friday, I trod with sufficient care. I was able to tell them that I spoke on Second Reading of the 2011 Act to point out that the women who left Foxhills comprehensive in my constituency in 1970 were the very women who would be affected, that it was not fair and that, frankly, there needed to be a better deal than two months’ transitional mudge.

I am aware that we are short of time, so I will just give a voice to those women. Marie Spikings said to me: “My personal story began when I was 15 years old, leaving school at Easter with no qualifications. From the start of my working life at 15 years I paid a full National Insurance stamp believing that I was entering into a contract.”

That is a common belief. She continued: “I understand the need for equality, however the 2011 Act has given me no time to prepare for working until I am 66! Not only have I lost thousands of pounds but also the benefits that come with the state pension e.g. heating allowance and bus pass etc.”

That is a key point about the other allowances, from which those women are now debarred. She told me: “I am a single parent through no fault of my own. Day to day life is a struggle as I have a dependent child, and a disabled dependent adult child. I am tired and the thought of having to work for another 5 years is daunting to say the least.”

Christine said to me: “I feel trapped.” Her choices have been taken away from her.

Annette said to me: “I was born in May 1954 and my state pension date has been moved twice, the first time I was informed in writing that it was changing from my 60th birthday to my 64th year. Since then I had heard nothing until someone told me to check the website by entering my DOB. The date for my state pension then came up as 2021 another 18 months on. I am sure you will agree this is completely unfair.”

The Government are penalising her for working hard all her life.
That is an example of the poor communication that we have heard about. Another woman pointed out to me that her older sister, who was born in April 1952, has already received her state pension. The woman who wrote to me is 22 months younger than her sister and has to wait an extra five years and five months—not fair and not reasonable. I could go on to give many similar examples.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): There are 3,540 women affected by the changes in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that the 1995 changes were reasonably well communicated, but the 2011 changes were badly communicated? Some women who are affected by the 1995 changes were also affected by the 2011 changes, which compounded the issue.

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend has it spot on. Communication, as the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) said, is one of the issues at the heart of the matter. What happened in 2011 compounded what had happened previously, and the situation is totally unfair.

The debate has been quite good since we got to the Back-Bench speeches, although my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) did a good job of kicking things off. I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who drew attention to my hon. Friend’s six suggestions and said that they were a good starting point. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said that there was a deal to be done, and I think he is right. The hon. Members for Salisbury (Tim Loughton) and for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) encouraged Ministers to find a way to put right the injustices.

The women we are talking about are not asking for the world. They are not even asking for the things that some people have suggested that they are asking for. They are simply asking for a reasonable settlement and a reasonable deal, which is what they deserve.

4.4 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Women of a certain age, of whom I am one, from right across the United Kingdom are very angry about the position they find themselves in. If they were born in March 1953, like Jill in the Jack and Jill twins scenario, they will be absolutely livid, because Jack will get £155 a week under the single-tier state pension, while Jill will get £131, because she was born a woman. Where is the justice in Jack getting £20,000 more over 20 years than his sister Jill? That is just ridiculous.

We all know women who do not have access to a private pension and who find themselves being forced to look for work or—if they take the advice of the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), who is no longer in his place—they can sign on for JSA. It is a slap in the face for every woman who has dedicated themselves to being the backbone of this country. The absence of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—my eyes tell me he is loitering outside the Chamber, but he is obviously unwilling to come in to defend his Government’s policies—is an absolute insult to these women.
around the table, on a cross-party basis and without scoring political points, to work out a solution to this terrible mess.

4.9 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I congratulate WASPI on its highly effective campaign, particularly all the women from my constituency who have contacted me or come to my surgeries. Women across the UK have been hit hard by the changes. To the surprise and dismay of many of them, the plans that they had made have been disrupted. Often, they face unemployment, with little hope of getting a job—a bleak life on benefits at a time when they should be enjoying the fruits of their long years of work.

Plaid Cymru supports the principle of equalising the pension age. Equalisation is another step towards recognising how radically circumstances have changed since the pension was brought in by my predecessor as the Member for Caernarfon, Lloyd George, when men worked for the money and generally supported women, and women worked at home for free. Those are not the circumstances now. It is not equalisation that is so unfair but the way in which the Government are bringing it in.

The Government say that they are making these changes in response to the increase in life expectancy. As one woman who contacted me said, “That’s all right then—it’s our fault for living longer.” Both life expectancy and life experience vary significantly depending on class and, crucially, on where one lives. Women in Wales will be hit particularly hard by the changes. Life expectancy is generally lower in Wales than in England—there is a difference of up to 11 years. Welsh women and Welsh men therefore have less opportunity to enjoy their retirement. Incomes in Wales are also low, so they have already suffered a disproportionate disadvantage. There are fewer job opportunities and jobs are more insecure, particularly in some constituencies.

On Monday, I asked the Prime Minister about the fate of the EU convergence funding that we in Wales won after a long and hard fight. He smiled sympathetically and went on to talk about Romania and Bulgaria. Disgracefully, that is where the incomes of women and men in Wales are—on a par with those in Romania and Bulgaria. Wales has the lowest income per head of all the UK nations and regions.

The equal treatment of women and men in respect of the state pension is good, but the way in which the Government have handled the matter is not. In fact, it is a disgrace.

4.11 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, 1950s-born women are not usually seen as a militant group. They were born and raised in the era of “Hi honey, I’m home,” spotless perfection, domestic bliss and Formica. The situation they now find themselves in is far from perfect.

I have only been an MP since May, but, as several Members have mentioned, including the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), this feels a bit like groundhog day. This is the third time I have raised the matter, and at other times I could not even get into Westminster Hall because it was standing room only. The TV show “Desperate Housewives” comes to mind, although the valiant WASPI women are far from desperate.

The Government have to act. The public are making their voices heard, and the Government are on the wrong side of public opinion. It feels like groundhog day because not only is what we are saying falling on deaf ears, but there is a broken record routine in the way we are told that there is no money left. At the same time, we constantly hear that economic growth is returning and things are looking rosy. The two things cannot be reconciled with each other.

The people we are talking about have been hit twice, as everyone has said. “Double-whammy” is the phrase that keeps coming up in the emails that I receive. They were hit in 1995 and 2011. I have heard the rejoinder from Government Members that the 1997 Labour Government did not do anything about the 1995 changes, but surely the Conservative Government and civil service of that time should have put a work plan in place. We hear that not all people were notified, but there should have been some provision in place for that to keep happening. Presumably because that Government were saving money on their communications strategy or something, that did not happen. Anyway, as many people have said, we are where we are.

Like many Members here, I have received representations from many people, including Michele Carlile, who was born in 1954, and Linda Gregory, who was born in 1953. Some have pointed out that they started work at 15. One of them said to me, “That’s probably a good 10 years before you did, my dear.” The circumstances that these people faced was different from what happens today. We must remember that the Equal Pay Act 1970 did not come into force until a Labour Government made it happen in 1976. These people brought up children before the free childcare and nurseries and all the other things that Labour Governments have brought in. We should therefore be sympathetic to their plight.

I think that in this debate people have confused the WASPI petition and the wording of the motion. Nobody is arguing against equality. Nobody is saying that there should be compensation at the levels that these people would have received. All that is being asked for is transitional arrangements to soften the blow. Some of the people in the campaign have been neutral money people, such as Paul Lewis of the BBC’s “Money Box”, a former constituent of mine, and Martin Lewis of moneysavingexpert.com.

I urge Government Members to vote with us tonight, simply for transitional arrangements, since this Government have found so much money down the back of the sofa for so many things. The former Pensions Minister in the coalition, Steve Webb, has admitted that people are hard done by, so in the 17 seconds that I have left, let me say that this great pensions swindle must end now.

4.15 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to make another contribution on this matter. I also want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the WASPI campaign for refusing to lie down and for continuing to fight for a transitional arrangement that will protect against the most damaging consequences of the rushed equalisation of the state pension.
All these women are asking for is fairness, and I commend them for keeping the issue alive. This is the fourth time that it has been debated in the House, which shows the strength of feeling, exposes the injustice of the situation and highlights the struggles that many women face daily from the delay in receiving the state pension. I accept that a lot of the damage was done in the 1995 Act, but the coalition Government exacerbated the situation and this Government’s refusal to rectify the blunder is not only political folly but plain wrong.

These women have paid into the system all their lives, and it is only right that the Government should step in to right this wrong. Responding to the motion, the Minister shamefully chose to repeat the accusation that WASPI is against the equalisation of the pension age for men and women. No, it is not. The Minister knows that. To use that line of argument again does a disservice to today’s debate, to the women sitting in the Gallery right now and those watching the debate at home, and to the struggles that they face as a result of the rug being pulled from under their feet just when they needed the support most. Furthermore, I was hoping that the Minister would give Members and, more importantly, the WASPI women a better response to today’s debate than the quite frankly pitiful response given in the petition debate in Westminster Hall. Sadly, I was wrong.

I run 13 surgeries a month across Paisley and Renfrewshire North, and over the past two to three months the majority of people attending them have raised this very issue. On this occasion, I want to take a little more time to highlight some of the heartbreaking stories I have heard. Many women were looking forward to having some more time to themselves, only to find out with a couple of months’ notice that they were not retiring at 60 as they had thought.

There are two ladies whose stories I want to highlight. One, who did not want her name mentioned, recently came to see me at a surgery. She has worked all her life, from the age of 17, and built a career for herself that she had to give up to care for her husband. Even while she was caring she worked part time, and she has never been on benefits. She stopped working at 58 because of her health, thinking that she would get both her state pension and her small civil service pension at 60. She has never received any letters from the DWP and only found out about the changes to her pension age through word of mouth.

Another constituent, Ms Millar, also received no letter. The changes have had a devastating impact on her finances, forcing her to sell her car and her house to be able to cut down on her work in the future. She has suffered from ME since she was 30, which makes it difficult for her to continue working as a teacher. Is the Minister listening to this? No. I think that he owes Ms Millar the courtesy of listening to my speech. She will now have to work a lot longer than she had anticipated, and she also has caring responsibilities, caring for her mum three days a week. The fact that she now needs to work six years longer than expected means that she has six fewer years to spend full time with her mum.

I challenge the Minister to respond to my constituents and advise them what they should do to ease their financial worries, bearing in mind their poor health and personal circumstances. My constituents are watching the debate, WASPI campaigners are watching the debate and the women in the Public Gallery are watching the debate. We are all waiting for the Government finally to wake up to the situation, show some humility and respond appropriately.

4.19 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Previous speakers have already said that pensions are not a benefit but a contract, and the Government have broken that contract. If that were done by a private company, it would be sued for mis-selling. When the terms of a contract change, there must be notification—actual notification, not Westminster politicians talking to each other—and mitigation when someone is disadvantaged. In this case, the Government must take responsibility and correct that.

What is the future for our pensions system if citizens cannot trust Government promises that when they pay in, they will receive their due amount at an agreed time? The situation reminds me and my constituents of someone who buys a car from a used-car salesman, but the car turns out to be dodgy. They bring it back, and the used-car salesman looks at it, scratches his head, and says, “I’d really like to help you out, but I just can’t.”

We are told that the Government will not move to put in appropriate transitional measures, but the greater cost of not acting is that of betraying all those women, many of whom spent a lifetime in low pay—we are literally picking their pockets and further alienating people from the cozy, Westminster establishment. We are told that money for transitional arrangements cannot be found, but I suspect that if companies such as Google paid their taxes, the Government would find that they had more money in the pot. Choices, choices—politics is nothing if it is not about choices. If the Government do not act on this issue, they have no alternative but to hang their head in shame.

The WASPI campaigners are calling for a review into the way that changes to the state pension age were implemented under the Pensions Acts of 1995 and 2011. What is wrong with that? Other European Governments have brought in pension equalisation arrangements without the distress, chaos and rammy created by this Government as they try to pick women’s pockets. Why is that? It is because other European Governments have not made a Horlicks of it. This is both cock-up and incompetence writ large.

I am sick to the back teeth of hearing Government Ministers boasting of a new flat-rate pension of £155.65 a week. Apart from the fact that that is utterly irrelevant to this debate, many people who reach pension age will receive much less than that because they will not have paid enough national insurance. Those in the private sector, the low-paid and those earning less than £15,000 a year will be hit hardest, and those people are much more likely to be female than male.

An independent commission is required to prevent further gender inequalities and ensure a fair universal pension system that looks at the looming injustices coming down the track in the form of the flat-rate pension, which will leave many low-paid people on lower pensions than they would otherwise have benefited from. So far, the Government have not listened to the
WASPI campaigners or to votes taken in this House, but I urge them to do so. We require fairness and natural justice, and it is time that the Government held their head up and faced these women.

4.23 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This is the fourth WASPI campaign debate that I have spoken in, and it is hard to find something new to say. I note that the Minister had the same problem, because his earlier performance at the Dispatch Box was a disgrace. He said that he would talk about transitional arrangements, but he did not—he avoided the matter the whole time, took interventions and fudged the issue. Let me remind him of a suggestion that he made in a previous answer to an oral question, when he said that women could use the pension freedoms to help themselves bridge the gap and transition to state pension age. For me, that shows that he does not understand that women are less likely to have pensions, and that the pensions they do have are more likely to be low in value. To suggest that women should blow their savings as a remedial measure, instead of the Government helping out, is crazy and irresponsible.

I also want to make the Minister aware of another ongoing issue that could compound matters and affect people's choice, namely the exit payment gap in the Enterprise Bill. The cap in its current format will further limit the choices for people considering early retirement or voluntary redundancy. The £95,000 cap will affect not the so-called fat cats but long-serving, lower paid workers. The cap in its current format covers the strain on pension funds that an employer requires to pay for early and ill-health retirement. That means that people taking ill-health retirement might have the money due to them capped because of this Government. That compounds matters. The exit cap prevents councils, such as the local authority I was a councillor for, from operating schemes such as Teacher Refresh, which allows higher paid experienced teachers to opt for early retirement. That allows younger teachers to be employed, saving the taxpayer money overall and creating jobs for younger teachers. Combine the cap with the increased retirement age and we have a bad deal for individuals—mainly women—a bad deal for local authorities, and a bad deal for the taxpayer overall.

Another impact of the increase in the state pension age in the 2011 Act is that it can make women more dependent on male partners. That is bad for personal esteem, bad for relationships and potentially damaging in cases of domestic abuse where women feel trapped financially. Women are concerned and are feeling stress due to the bombshell that has been dropped on them. Instead of ignoring what is going on and ignoring the four debates, the Government should think about the consequences and do something about them.

The Government hide behind the £30 billion estimate to fully reverse the 2011 Act. People today are asking for transitional arrangements, but the £30 billion to do a full reversal could be found. The Government found an extra £16 billion in the defence review for Trident, to add to the £167 billion that had already been committed. They have allocated £12 billion for the right to buy social housing. They could introduce a bank levy and a mansion tax. They could reverse the inheritance tax and stop adding more people to the other place. Those are all choices to spend more money or subsidise other policies, while introducing austerity in other ways.

The Government have already lost court cases relating to the personal independence payment and the bedroom tax. There is a great chance they will lose another court case due to the unfairness of this measure and the lack of notice given to women. As has been said, this is a breach of contract. I ask the Minister to please take that into account and to put in place some transitional arrangements.

4.27 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am pleased to finally be able to take part in this debate on transitional state pension arrangements. As many hon. Members have pointed out, we have had many debates recently on the subject of women's state pension age inequality. Now, however, we are talking about practical solutions and considering seriously transitional arrangements. Remember, this is transition—it is not forever and it will not cost £30 billion or £39 billion, or whatever other figure has been floating around the Chamber. Transitional payments will help all the women born in the 1950s who have suffered the double whammy of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts. Those women have emailed, written, phoned, Facebooked and tweeted me, and many of my fellow MPs, on seeing their retirement plans disintegrate.

The basic issue here is fairness. All we are asking is for the women affected to be treated fairly. This group of women have not been communicated with properly. Many of them tell me that they either did not receive letters or that the letters they did receive were unclear. Contrary to the view held by some in this Chamber, the WASPI campaign is not asking to go back to receiving state pensions at 60. What they are asking for is simply fair treatment. These are women who work part time and who were not even eligible for their occupational pension schemes when they started work. These are women who gave up work to bring up children, which affected their personal occupational pension if they were lucky enough to have one. These are women who have worked in difficult conditions, many of whom have had to retire early because of ill health. These are women who, as well as bringing up children, are now shouldering the burden of caring for elderly relatives in their later lives. These women have all been through the doors of my surgeries in my constituency, and I am sure their story is familiar to all right hon. and hon. Members. My constituents frequently urge me to take this argument to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—[Interruption. I have extreme difficulty doing so, because he has not attended a single one of the many debates we have had on this subject.

Jackie, one of my constituents, introduced herself to me as “June '54 and furious!” She made the valid point that denying her access to her state pension until she is 66 also denies her entitlement to concessionary travel and the winter fuel allowance. Jackie started work in 1971, but had to take early retirement from the police service in order to care for an elderly relative.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), the shadow Secretary of State, has made six helpful suggestions about how fair transition could be put in place to help women such as Jackie. Let us stop prevaricating. I await the Minister's response to those sensible and reasonable suggestions, which—

I might add—have been supported by many
Government Members. Let us help to turn Jackie from being “June ’54 and furious!” to “June ’54 and finally fairly transitioned”.

4.31 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In common with others, I regret that much of the debate from the Dispatch Box was focused on fixing the blame rather than fixing the problem, but at least the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) put forward a six-pack of options, which he rightly asked the Government to consider. Let us remember that the salient point about the motion is that it “calls on the Government to bring forward proposals for transitional arrangements for women adversely affected by the acceleration of the increase in the state pension age.”

That is logical, reasonable and compelling, which is why the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is prepared to support it. I ask some of his hon. Friends to join him in supporting it, not least those who valiantly fought over Equitable Life and called on the taxpayer to restore Equitable Life members to some position of equivalence. If they were prepared to fight for the Equitable Members Action Group and were indignant over Equitable Life, they should not be indifferent to the WASPI women and what they face. We should respond to them with justice.

It is not just a matter of a breach of trust and a breach of contract, because there is also the question of moral hazard. If Parliament says, “We can be quite capricious with the state pension”, we send out a signal to all the private pension providers that they can do what they want, that politicians will be in no place to reprimand them and that the regulator will not be able to interfere. We send out a very dangerous signal, too, to those younger people who were encouraged to have rules can be changed, so younger people will ask why they happened to their mothers shows that even when provision planning. We send out a signal to them that what was passed in the last Parliament. The Government can change legislation to introduce cuts, but they cannot change legislation to bring justice to people.

We should compare the present position with the position in 2011. What we have now are pension freedoms, and a tax windfall for the Treasury. The Government should bear in mind the new fiscal ambit that comes with those pension freedoms, and use it to introduce pension justice—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call the shadow Minister.

4.35 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is absolutely great to follow the excellent speech made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan).

Enormous interest has been expressed in this issue by Members on both sides of the House, not least thanks to the sterling work of the WASPI campaigners and the 154,000 people who signed their petition. As the Minister knows, there was standing room only during the Westminster Hall debate on the subject—it was the first Westminster Hall debate in which I took part as the shadow Minister—because the subject was of significance to all Members. We heard from many about the women who feel ill-prepared and short-changed by the failure to communicate and to deliver full transitional arrangements.

Members have made some excellent points today, illustrating the stark reality that is faced by the many women who are trying to plan for their retirement in the context of these changes. Members in all parts of the House made passionate speeches on behalf of their constituents. I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). I also thank the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton).

There has been cross-party support for the WASPI women, and understanding of the difficulties that they face.

I know that it is sometimes difficult for Conservative Members to speak out against the Government, and I give particular credit to those who have done so: the hon.
Members for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries), for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), for Salisbury (John Glen), and for East Worthing and Shoreham. I know that it is difficult to make passionate speeches of that kind, and I thank those Members for their contributions.

I would say this to the Tories—I am sorry, the Members opposite—[HON. MEMBERS: “They are the Tories.”] That is what we call them locally. I am being nice when I call them the Members opposite. I am referring to the hon. Members for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans), and for Sherwood (Mark Spencer). This is not a question of racing back to the 1950s, and it is not about the 1995 changes. I say to Members, “Please read the motion.” We have offered options, and I have asked the Minister many times to give me costings for transitional arrangements. I urge Members to examine their consciences, to take account of the passionate debate that we have had, and to vote in favour of the motion.

Let me briefly mention my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds)—who is apparently a great feminist, although not as much of one as I am—[Interruption.] All right, I am sorry: perhaps he is. Let me also mention my hon. Friends the Members for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Bury (Julie Cooper), for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). Others who spoke in support of the motion were the hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams), for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). I am so relieved that I got all those constituencies right! That, not the Minister, kept me awake at night.

Despite the views that were expressed by Members in all parts of the House, however, the Secretary of State has still refused to consider transitional protections for these women. Of course, hindsight is a wonderful thing, but it is crucial that we learn from the mistakes of the past and act accordingly. We know that the Minister’s predecessor had hoped that about a tenth of the direct savings of £3 billion would be put aside for transitional arrangements. The option that was eventually put forward as a concession—the 18-month cap—cost about a third of that. So we have a missing £2 billion, which has gone with the Treasury along with the rest of the savings. There are different options for transitional protection, and many Members on both sides of the House have suggested them today, but the Government have again failed to respond.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Lady has referred to the £1.1 billion, which brought the extension down from two years to 18 months and, we are told, dealt with 81% of the women affected. So only 20% roughly are left at 18 months and the cost would be up to £200 million. Can we put it to Government that that £200 million would have bought the loyalty of the rest of us this evening, but will not if they do not do that?

Angela Rayner: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I hope that the Minister will answer that question. Just over £1 billion was put in. According to my research, over half of that was for men.

This is not the first time that Labour Members have asked the Government to consider these changes. As I have said, I would like to see and hear what the Government have done to look at transitional arrangements. We have had many debates in the House on the matter and, as Members have rightly said, this issue crosses party lines.

People watching this debate today are incredibly proud of where I have come from. I was a home help and many women who pushed me into coming into the House of Commons will be watching the debate and are affected by the changes. When I stood for Parliament, I was asked, “What is your proudest moment?” I would say it is delivering equal pay and standing up for women’s rights. We have a choice today and we must do the right thing. Many Members have said that. I hope that the Minister has listened to the debate and that the Government do the right thing.

4.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): I am sorry that the limited time available prevents me from paying credit to all the Members who have spoken today. There has been real passion, and well thought out and measured responses on both sides of the House, drawing on the challenges we face, the concerns raised directly by residents and the work of the WASPI campaign, to which many Members are paying close attention.

I pay credit to the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and to the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), who made the shortest speech today and gave some people some extra time. I understand the challenge that my hon. Members have faced, particularly to go against our own Government. My hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) have found themselves in. It is a difficult decision, but it is about doing the right thing, to do the right thing.

The Opposition have set out six options, which are very attractive. How simple life would be if we could simply say yes to all six, or any number of those six options. However, the challenge is that not a single one has been costed. Not a single one has suggested what we should not be doing. There is occasionally vague guesswork on what could pay for something. I was in two debates yesterday in Westminster Hall. The same vague ideas were expressed on how things could be paid for.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: Because of the lack of time, I will not give way.

We have to look at the acceleration of state pension age equalisation, which is being introduced by this Government in order to achieve gender equality in state pension provision and to provide a sustainable system that can work for future generations. Often that is forgotten. It is always about now, not those future
generations, our children and our children's children, to whom all too often politicians have bequeathed yet more debt.

In recent years, because of higher life expectancy and the difference in state pension ages, women on average have been receiving considerably more state pension over their lifetime than men. Not only was equalisation necessary to meet the UK's obligations under EU law, but it provides the foundations for a fairer state pension that treats men and women equally.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I apologise to those who want to intervene. Those who debated with me in Westminster Hall know that I will always try to answer as many questions and interventions as possible. We simply do not have time today.

Equalisation provides the foundations for a fairer state pension that treats men and women equally. That is something we can all agree on, on both sides of the House. The changes to state pension age were fully considered when the 2011 Act was passed. The Government listened to concerns at the time and adopted a concession worth over £1 billion, which benefited almost a quarter of a million women. Eighty-one per cent. of women affected will experience a delay of 12 months or less, compared with the previously legislated timetable.

The Government are also committed to helping older workers stay in the labour market and have extended the right of flexible working to all employees to help achieve this. We are now seeing record numbers of women in employment—over 1 million more since 2010. With the introduction of the national living wage, over two thirds of those who will directly benefit are women. For those who are having difficulties working, the Government provide the same support for women as for men of the same age—in work, out of work, and disability benefits.

I also appreciate the comments made about Government communication. My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale made great play of this. All Governments of all political colours have always wrestled with the question of the best way to communicate. The DWP did write directly to all the individuals affected by the 2011 Act using the address details recorded by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs at the time. More than 5 million letters were sent at the time. A service has also been available for individuals to request their state pension letters were sent at the time. A service has also been provided at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs at the time. More than 5 million women have been receiving considerably more state pension than men. Not only was equalisation necessary to meet the UK's obligations under EU law, but it provides the foundations for a fairer state pension that treats men and women equally.

In conclusion, I remind the House of the reasons for the reform of our state pension system. To function effectively, it has to be fair, affordable and sustainable. These changes made to the state pension age under the Pensions Act 2011 make an important contribution to achieving these aims.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 265, Noes 289.

Division No. 199

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bottomley, Sir Peter
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
Burton, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Cox, Jo
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Crudging, Jon
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex

Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Dorries, Nadine
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Elliot, Tom
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Henderson, Gordon
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, Rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, Rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, Rh Mr David
Lilley, Rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
May, Rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCann, Karl
McLoughlin, Rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, Rh Mrs Maria
Millin, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Rh Anne
Mitchell, Rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, Rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, Rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Newton, Sarah
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Parish, Neil
Patel, Rh Priti
Paterson, Rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, Rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Rh Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Rh Dominic
Redwood, Rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, Rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, Rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, Rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Soames, Rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, Rh Anna
Speelman, Rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, Rh Mr Desmond
Swire, Rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Rh Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, Rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Rh Mr Andrew
Tyrie, Rh Mr Andrew
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, Rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Rh Mr Robin
Wallace, Rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, Rh Gavin
Wilson, Rh Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, Rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Jackie Doyle-Price and
Guy Opperman

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have now to announce the result of two deferred Divisions. In respect of the Question relating to road traffic, the Ayes were 299 and the Noes were 226, so the Question was agreed to. In respect of the Question relating to estimates, the Ayes were 301 and the Noes were 60, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today’s debates.]
Police Funding, Crime and Community Safety

5 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recalls that the Chancellor announced in the Autumn Statement 2015 that there would be real-terms protection for police funding; notes that, based on the scale of cuts proposed, police budgets will fall by between nine and ten per cent over four years in real terms; further notes that the failure to provide real-terms protection for the police budget will lead to further cuts in police numbers in addition to the 18,357 police officers already lost since 2010; notes that the inclusion of cybercrime in cuts in police numbers in addition to the 18,357 police officers already lost since 2010; notes that the inclusion of cybercrime in real-terms protection for police budgets will fall by between nine and ten per cent over four years; and calls on the Government to honour the Chancellor’s statement to the House of Commons, but it seems that we live in different times.

We called this debate for one simple reason: the public have not been told the truth about police funding or crime figures. With the second police and crime commissioner elections just weeks away, people need the facts so this evening we set the record straight.

A matter of weeks ago the Chancellor of the Exchequer stood at the Dispatch Box and made this explicit promise to the police and to the public:

“There will be real-terms protection for police funding. The police protect us, and we are going to protect the police.”—[Official Report, 25 November 2015, Vol. 602, c. 1373.]

I am sure Conservative Members remember that because they waved their Order Papers. It could not have been clearer—“real-terms protection”. That was not an off-the-cuff remark or a slip of the tongue. It was the centrepiece announcement of the Chancellor’s autumn spending review statement, made with the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister at his side; it was the traditional rabbit out of the hat that we have come to expect on such occasions, designed to produce mass waving of Order Papers.

There was once a time when, if the Chancellor of the Exchequer made a statement of that kind in that way to this House, it would have meant something more than just a grab for the next day’s headlines. People could trust it to be true, because it had been said by a Chancellor of the Exchequer at the Dispatch Box in the House of Commons, but it seems that we live in different times. Ministers these days, from the Prime Minister downwards, are decidedly less attentive than they used to be to the veracity of what they say at the Dispatch Box. Every Member of this House should worry, because in the end it goes to the heart of trust in this place and what we all do.

Surely, of all public services, the police should be able to trust the word of Ministers of the Crown when commitments are given here. Would it not be a sign of disrespect to people who put themselves in harm’s way on our behalf day in, day out if the Chancellor was writing cheques that he knew he would not be able to cash? You would think so, wouldn’t you, but in today’s politics Ministers think they can say what they like and get away with it.

This evening I will present to the House new analysis which shows that the Chancellor has broken his promise to the police and to the public. He has failed to provide real-terms protection for police budgets in 2016-17. In fact, he is about to cut those police budgets yet again, for the sixth year in a row. For the six years that he has been Chancellor and the six years that the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) has been Home Secretary, we have had six years of cuts to the police. What a record! And to think that the Conservatives used to call themselves the party of law and order.

The issue before the House tonight is this: are we prepared to let the Government think that they can get away with making promises to this House and then breaking them within days, or are we going to do something about it? Are we going to hold them to account and make them honour the promise they made to our local police forces?

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I do not want to go too far back in history, but if my right hon. Friend looks at 3 February 2010 he will see that there were 18,000 more police officers under the Labour Government, but the increase in the budget for 2010-11 was 2.7%, and the Conservative party felt that it was not enough at the time.

Andy Burnham: I was just about to make that very point. The cuts that we are now facing come on top of the loss of 18,000 police officers over the previous Parliament, as my right hon. Friend has just said, and 12,000 of them were front-line officers. Thousands of police community support officers and civilian staff have lost their jobs. We have begun to see the break-up of neighbourhood policing, which was a great achievement of the previous Labour Government, bringing police out of their stations and cars and back into communities, restoring trust and bringing down crime. That is a record that Labour should be proud of.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend also aware that commitments were given that the sale of police stations and other buildings would help to ensure that there were additional police officers on the frontline? In my constituency we have lost St John’s Wood police station and Harrow Road police station, and I understand that Paddington Green police station has now been sold, yet our police numbers are still nearly 30% down on where they were in 2011.

Andy Burnham: The same story is repeated all over the country. I ask my hon. Friend to think about the cuts that have been made to other services alongside the police, such as those to councils, mental health services, social care, disability benefits, ambulance services and fire services. All those cuts pile extra pressure on our overstretched police forces. That is what we are seeing. The cuts now being planned come at a time when this country is facing multiple challenges on many fronts, and when the threat level has never been higher, so something has to give.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a stark contrast with the approach that the Welsh Labour Government are taking, with funding for hundreds of extra PCSOs in Wales making up for the shortfall they have seen as a result of cuts elsewhere?

Andy Burnham: I think that people will hear what my hon. Friend has said and make their own judgment. Who protects community safety? Who stands up for the
police? When people come to vote this May, there is the evidence that when Labour is in government, when we run councils and when we have Labour police and crime commissioners, we protect front-line and neighbourhood policing and we improve community safety. My hon. Friend makes that point very well.

The question we have to ask the Home Secretary today is this: how many more consecutive years of cuts can police forces take before public safety is seriously compromised? England and Wales already have far fewer police officers per head of population compared with international counterparts. If the ratio drops even lower, there are real fears that were a Paris-style attack to happen here, and, importantly, were it to happen outside London, there would simply not be the ability to surge enough police officers—specifically, fire arms officers and specialist units—on to the streets quickly enough to protect the public.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I understand that the right hon. Gentleman is giving this a bit of welly as part of his rehabilitation, but I am confused about two things. First, I have yet to hear him acknowledge that over the past seven years crime has continued to fall quite significantly. Secondly, I have yet to hear him refer to his own recommendation of 10% cuts in police funding, which he made not six months ago. Would he care to enlighten the House on both points?

Andy Burnham: I will come on to both points. I am doing fine, thanks. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can see that I will be standing up for police forces, even if he is not. I will come on to both points he raises, because I do not think that his Government are telling the correct story about what they are doing to the police. They are not providing real-terms protection; they are cutting the police. Ministers also stand at the Dispatch Box and say crime is falling; the Policing Minister said it just days ago—complacently. They fail to point out that the crime figures they quote do not include online crime, which is about to come into the crime statistics for the first time. In the last six years, crime has changed—it has moved online—but the relevant figures have not been counted, so I would not be so complacent if I were him.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned what was said at the autumn statement about what I was meant to have said. What I would say to him is that there is far too much spin coming from the Government Dispatch Box. He should look at what I actually said. I am about to come straight to that issue.

I have talked about the specialist and firearms units we need to protect the public. However, neighbourhood policing is crucial, is it not, if we are to collect the intelligence to combat the terror threat. My worry is that if the Government proceed in this Parliament with year-on-year cuts, they will break up the neighbourhood teams. Let me take the House in detail through what I am saying and through the figures we are presenting.

Analysis by the House of Commons Library of next year’s police grant settlement to individual forces shows that they will not be protected in real terms; in fact, they will not even be cash-protected. In 2015-16, the overall allocation to individual forces, excluding special payments to London, was £7,452 million. In 2016-17, it will be £7,421 million—a £30 million cash reduction, or £160 million in real terms.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): A few moments ago, the right hon. Gentleman rightly said that the level of threat is severe, and we are all aware of that. May I make the same invitation to him that I made to his Front-Bench colleague, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), in the previous policing debate? The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance of armed police officers. The Leader of the Opposition has made it clear that, in his vision of policing, even if those officers are armed, they will not be allowed to use their weapons. Will the shadow Home Secretary admit that that is a dereliction of duty? Will he take this opportunity, while he is speaking from the Dispatch Box, to clarify the Opposition’s position?

Andy Burnham: I can tell the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman now that the Leader of the Opposition said that that was simply not the case. There is no change whatever to long-established policy when it comes to the police keeping the public safe.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in addition to the cuts, the 4.6% police precept rise in the west midlands, which was apparently negotiated by the hon. Members for Solihull (Julian Knight) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood), amounts to nothing more than local people paying more money for less police?

Andy Burnham: The Government are cutting the police at national level, making local people in the west midlands—and in Greater Manchester too—pick up the bill, but people are getting less in terms of police on their streets. We know, do we not, that the Government are very good at making cuts in urban areas such as Greater Manchester and the west midlands and at taking money elsewhere. That is the reality: our constituents will be paying more for less. The Chancellor and the Home Secretary have broken their police promise to our constituents.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Talking about cuts, we have lost 108 police officers and 104 PCSOs in my constituency since 2010. The only increase we have seen has been in voluntary special constables—and that was 98. The Government are trying to police using volunteers, not police officers.

Andy Burnham: I will come to that as well. The Bill we will debate in a week or so is all about having a part-time police force to deal with the growing threat we face from online crime and fraud and from terror. That is simply not an answer to the challenges of the future, and I will come to that before I finish.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Andy Burnham: I will make a little more progress, and then I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Let us just get the facts on the record: 36 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales have now received their grant allocations from the Home Office, and these
show a cut in cash terms. How does that deliver the Chancellor’s pledge of real-terms protection? Worse, all police forces in England face real-terms cuts next year. If the same level of cuts is sustained over the spending review period, as we suspect it will be, that will equate to overall real-terms cuts in the police budget of between 9% and 10%.

The House will recall that right up until the spending review—[Interruption.] I am coming to the point. Right up until the spending review, the police had been told to expect cuts of over 20%. Senior police officers say that they were still expecting cuts of over 20% the day before the spending review settlement. The hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) nods because he knows I am right about that. It was sustained pressure from Labour Members that forced a rethink from the Government.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May) rose—

Andy Burnham: I will give way to the Home Secretary in a moment.

After the Paris attacks, the whole question of police funding had to be looked at in a new light. I wrote to the Home Secretary and said that while of course efficiencies could be made, anything over 5% cuts in real terms over the course of this Parliament would be dangerous. That was completely misrepresented by the Chancellor in his autumn statement, and I am pleased to correct the record today.

Mrs May: When my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who was a distinguished deputy Mayor for policing here in London, referred to the 10% figure that the right hon. Gentleman had quoted, the right hon. Gentleman said that there was far too much spin from the Government side of the House. The figure actually came from a Labour party press release where he said:

“Of course, savings can be found. The police say five to ten per cent over the Parliament is just about do-able”.

He accepted 10%, so why is he now so worried about cuts in funding?

Andy Burnham: When that press release was issued I said that up to 5% would be do-able—[Interruption.] No, I have said this consistently, if the Home Secretary will just listen. I said that up to 5% cuts would be doable, and we stand by that; that up to 10% would be difficult; and that over 10% would be dangerous. She was threatening to cut the police by over 20%, so let us get the facts straight. She will recall that she asked Cobra to review police funding in the light of the Paris attacks. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey)—the shadow Policing Minister—and I also consulted the police in the light of the Paris attacks. We listened to what they had to say, as the Home Secretary will have done. They said that over 5% would be difficult, if not dangerous, and I put that in a letter to her before the autumn statement. Let us get this right so that the public are not misinformed and there is no spin from the Government Dispatch Box.

In his desperation to play politics in the autumn statement, the Chancellor tried to misrepresent my position, but he outdid himself, because he misrepresented not just my position but the Government’s position. He dressed up a 10% cut as budget protection, and we now know that it is nothing of the sort. No doubt the Government’s defence will rest on the claim that they gave councils extra freedom to increase the police precept to make up the shortfall, but that does not hold water.

For the Chancellor to give the guarantee in this House as he did, he would have needed firm agreements from local councils and PCCs that they would raise the extra cash locally, but he did not have those agreements—not even from Conservative PCCs. The Devon and Cornwall and Cambridgeshire forces will not be raising their precepts by the full amount recommended by the Government, and Hertfordshire is actually shown to have lowered its precept. [Interruption.] The Home Secretary says, “It’s their decision”, but let me tell her again: she promised real-terms protection for police budgets, and she is not delivering real-terms protection for police budgets. She has broken her promise to the police. I am afraid that she cannot just shrug that fact off. The Conservative PCC for Devon and Cornwall, Tony Hogg, says this about the implications of the spending review for his force:

“While I completely welcome the Government’s changed position on Police funding, it remains a fact that central Government funding to Devon and Cornwall Police in 2020 is estimated to be 19% less in cash terms (real terms 32% less) than it was when I commenced office in November 2012.”

A 32% cut in real terms, with 43 officers going next year and 28 police staff going too, is not on, and the Government cannot just shrug it off.

The next claim that the Government will no doubt make is that authorities that have used the precept freedoms to the full will have been able to protect their budgets, but that is not true either. The Hampshire independent PCC, Simon Hayes, said:

“The Medium Term Financial Strategy...shows an estimated budget shortfall of £6m by 2019/20 assuming 1.99% council tax precept increases from 2016/17 onwards.”

He cannot make up the shortfall from his precept.

Let me apply the same test to the Home Secretary’s police force and my own. Next year, Thames Valley police will see a real-terms cut in central Government funding of £5 million. The income raised by the full use of the precept does not cover that shortfall. Forces such as Thames Valley also have to contend with other cost burdens loaded on to them by the Chancellor, including the apprentice-ship levy and the extra national insurance contributions. In the case of Thames Valley, those amount to more than £6 million. That is money out of front-line policing. What is the net effect of that in the Home Secretary’s police force? She should listen to this: 95 officers going next year, as well as 51 police community support officers and 161 staff. There we have it. The Home Secretary has broken her own police pledge to her constituents.

Let us look at my force, Greater Manchester police. According to figures from the Library, central Government funding will be down by £8 million in real terms next year. The force has made full use of the freedoms from the precept, but that will not make up the shortfall. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) said, the force will be paying more for less. As the PCC for Greater Manchester, Tony Lloyd, puts it:

“Contrary to the Chancellor’s rhetoric, this is a cuts budget.”
Catherine McKinnell: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and highlighting the differential impacts, as well as the impact across the board. I want to give the House the example of Northumbria police. Just 12% of its revenue comes from the council tax precept. That is far below the national average of 25%, and that hampers its ability to make up for the shortfall. Northumbria is the worst hit of all forces, with local residents paying more for less.

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The more deprived parts of the country have less ability to raise money from their council tax base, so they cannot make up for the Government’s cuts. I am sorry to tell her that the situation could be about to get even worse. The Guardian reported yesterday that the Home Secretary is about to bring forward a new police funding formula—after the mess that the Policing Minister made of the last one—which will divert funding away from urban forces towards rural ones.

Mrs May indicated dissent.

Andy Burnham: The Home Secretary is shaking her head, and I am glad; I hope that she will tell me that that is not true. Recently, £300 million was miraculously made available for local government in England at the last minute, but—surprise, surprise—barely a penny went to any council represented by Labour. It all went to councils represented by the Conservatives. If the police funding formula did the same, it would add insult to injury and make a complete and utter mockery of the Government’s already dubious commitment to creating a northern powerhouse.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I have listened carefully to the shadow Home Secretary for 22 minutes, and his entire assessment of how the police are doing is based on the amount of money that the Government have given them. There has been absolutely no mention of smarter policing, better procurement or better use of technology. We heard yesterday in the Home Affairs Committee from a former Labour Member of this House and former Minister who is now the PCC for Merseyside. She has managed to halve the budget for her office compared with that of the former police authority, and all that money has gone into front-line policing. There is more to policing than the amount of money that the police receive from central office.

Andy Burnham: I could not have put it better myself. Vote Labour. Vote for a Labour PCC. Labour PCCs will work cleverly to protect front-line policing, and they will drive innovation and reform. Protect our police because crime is falling. That is basically the argument made by the hon. Member for North West Hampshire, who formerly had responsibility for policing in London—but is it true? The latest recorded crime statistics in January showed large increases in violent crime, knife crime, hate crime and sexual offences.

As ever, Ministers will say, “Look at the British crime survey,” but as I have said, crime has changed: it has migrated online. We might see a downward trend in the traditional volume crimes such as burglary and theft in the British crime survey, but when we ask the British public whether they have been the victim of online crime, they will probably say, “Yes, I have been.” If those figures are not included in the British crime survey, it is no wonder that we do not have an accurate picture of crime.

Kit Malthouse rose—

Andy Burnham: I will give way one final time.

Kit Malthouse: I recognise the issue that the right hon. Gentleman raises, but will he accept that we cannot patrol to prevent online crime? The solution to online crime is not throwing bodies at it but about throwing technology at it, which can be done either relatively cheaply or much more efficiently.

Andy Burnham: What we should not do is to throw volunteers at it, which is the Home Secretary’s idea. [Interruption.] I will come on to explain that. This is about both technology and people. We need sophisticated teams to deal with it. It is fair to say that most police forces do not have such a capability at the moment, and they will not get that capability by having their numbers and their budgets cut. We need a sophisticated response to online crime.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) is trying to suggest that there is no link between crime and the reduction in support and funding for police services. In Greater Manchester, £8.5 million and 1,600 staff have been cut, and we know that there has been an increase in crime. In my constituency, the number of burglaries has doubled year on year. Is that not the effect of what the Government are doing?

Andy Burnham: That is directly the effect of what the Government have done, compared with what they inherited. How on earth can that police force now develop the capability to online crime. By voting Labour in May. I thank the hon. Gentleman for making my point better than I could have done.
capability to deal with the threats we will face in the future? The argument that crime is falling so we can cut the police will not work any more. Ministers are going to have to get a new script. It is not safe to cut the police, because crime is becoming more complex.

Mrs May: I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for giving way to me a second time. He is making an argument about the importance of accuracy in reporting figures. May I therefore ask him why, in relation to a Labour party press release on crime statistics issued in January, under the heading “crime up 6 per cent, the biggest increase”, the UK Statistics Authority wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) to say that “by focusing on police recorded crime without appropriate caveats, and omitting evidence from the more complete and reliable source for most violent crimes” of the Crime Survey for England and Wales, it may have given, in parts, a misleading impression?

Will the right hon. Gentleman now apologise?

Andy Burnham: No, I will not, because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington said, the figures were accurately reported. The challenge today is for the Home Secretary to explain her claim that crime is falling, because I am afraid the recorded crime figures do not show that, and some experts say that the British crime survey is about to show that crime has in fact doubled. That is the issue that she has to explain, and she will have to work hard to do so.

Tackling online crime is one of the biggest challenges we face, but as I have said, forces do not have the capability. The question is, how are they going to do that with these further cuts? To be fair, the Home Secretary has floated one idea, which I have just mentioned. She told the BBC website in January that she was planning to recruit a new army of volunteers to help solve cybercrimes. She said that “volunteers who specialise in accounting or computing”, as well as IT professionals, “could work alongside police officers to investigate cyber or financial crime”.

I ask in all honesty, is that really the best the Government can come up with to crack the complex crime challenges of the future—Theresa’s temps, a Dad’s Army of retired accountants to take on and defeat the sophisticated international organised crime and fraud networks?

The week after next, we will debate the Home Secretary’s Bill, which will propose that powers be given to volunteers without their becoming special constables. Is that really the answer—a part-time police force? It does not equate to a vision for policing in England and Wales that is up to the challenges of the future. A part-time police force is no answer to the growing threats we face from cybercrime and terrorism. When it is the only answer that the Government can come up with, it is a sure sign that their cuts have gone way too far.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It was suggested by the former deputy Mayor that these things can be done by sophisticated algorithms that can filter out such crimes. Actually, the victims of such crimes still feel that they need a police officer to come round and speak to them. That is the problem, especially when 1,000 front-line police officers in Merseyside are being cut.

Andy Burnham: We have seen this cost cutting and privatisation elsewhere, haven’t we? Take NHS 111, which was going to solve everything because of the algorithms that the call handlers would use. Has the service to the public been better than under NHS Direct? In no way. My hon. Friend has got it absolutely right. The Government suggest that it can all be done on the cheap, but people know it cannot.

In conclusion, the official line from the Government has been, “We’re protecting the police and crime is falling,” but that claim is something that should be added to the growing fraud statistics. The truth is the opposite: the police are being cut while crime is rising. They are cutting the fire service and the Border Force even more deeply—Tory cuts that are putting people’s safety at risk. That is the message that we will take into the PCC elections. Our police do a difficult job in a dangerous world. They deserve our thanks and respect, particularly those of the Government of the day. If promises are made to them, they should be kept. As we have shown, Labour is prepared to stand up for the police and protect community safety. That is what we are asking the House to do tonight by making this arrogant Government honour their commitment to the police. Real-terms protection should mean just that. What better way is there for Members on both sides of the House to show their appreciation for their local police forces than by voting for the Opposition motion tonight?

5.32 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Let me start by paying tribute to the police, the fire and rescue services and all those who attended the incident at Didcot power station yesterday. In doing so, they showed the courage and professionalism that police officers and firefighters show day in and day out.

The right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) called for a debate on police funding, crime and community safety. I am delighted that he did so and I will set out the steps the Government are taking to continue cutting crime, keep people safe from terrorism and reform our police and emergency services in a moment, but before I do, I would like to address the motion before us. He said that he called this debate to expose “Tory lies”, but the truth is that the motion contains nothing but inaccuracies and misleading statements. I will address each in turn.

The right hon. Gentleman says in the motion that “police budgets will fall by between nine and ten per cent over four years in real terms”. That is, frankly, not true. As the Chancellor set out in the autumn statement, overall police spending will increase from nearly £11.4 billion this year to £12.3 billion at the end of the spending review period—an increase of just under 8% or £900 million in cash terms. There will be protection in real terms over the course of this Parliament if police and crime commissioners maximise their precept. The funding for individual PCC budgets, which includes funding from central Government and local taxpayers through the precept, will be protected in cash terms.
We will provide substantial additional investment over the period in transformation funding to improve police capabilities to deal with modern threats such as terrorist firearms attacks, cybercrime and other emerging threats.

When the right hon. Gentleman calls on the Government to provide real-terms protection for the policing budget, I can happily tell Members that we have done just that. That is in stark contrast to the right hon. Gentleman himself. Earlier, I referred to a Labour party press release, but addressing the Labour party conference last year the shadow Home Secretary made it clear that he would support cutting the police by “5 per cent to 10 per cent over the Parliament”. It is one thing to criticise the Government for imaginary spending cuts, but it is quite another to do so after arguing for significant spending reductions.

The right hon. Gentleman also argues that police forces might make further reductions to the number of police officers and staff. Notwithstanding the point that police budgets have been protected for the spending review period, decisions on the size and composition of a police force’s workforce are for individual chief officers working closely with their police and crime commissioners. The lesson of the past five years is that what matters is how officers are deployed, not how many of them there are.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have heard the Home Secretary comment that she is not particularly concerned about the numbers, but I wonder whether she is concerned about the fact that Humberside police force has the lowest level of police officers since the 1970s. Does that not concern her at all?

Mrs May: The point that I am making is very simple and I am happy to repeat it to the hon. Lady. The Labour party consistently looks at the amount of money that is spent and at the number of police officers, but what we need to look at is how money is being spent and how the officers are being deployed. It is not just me who is saying that. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary has made it clear that there is no simple link between officer numbers and crime levels, between numbers and the visibility of police in the community or between numbers and the quality of service provided.

Andy Burnham: I am listening carefully to what the Home Secretary is saying and she has repeated the claim that she is protecting the police in real terms. Is she therefore denying the figures from the House of Commons Library that show 36 out of 43 police forces in England and Wales receiving cash cuts in their allocation from the Home Office for 2016-17?

Mrs May: When the right hon. Gentleman looks at figures for overall police spending he needs to look at figures for overall police spending, because they include the money being spent. He was very careful. He said when he looked at his figures that he was not looking, for example, at the extra grants for London through the capital city grant. He was not looking at the money being spent on the emergency services mobile scheme that we are introducing to replace Airwave. He needs to look more carefully at the figures that he is citing.

Richard Fuller: The Home Secretary makes a very good point; this is not just about the total money but about how money is spent. The problems on the Labour side also come down to a local level, not just a national level. Does not my right hon. Friend agree that although we understand the problems with financing policing in Bedfordshire, it undermines the case when the PCC for Bedfordshire has one of the highest proportions of commissioned police officers in staff roles rather than on the frontline and when he does not spend the budget allocated to him, for example, on counter-terrorism?

Mrs May: I agree with my hon. Friend, and it is very striking when we look at the figures for Bedfordshire how many officers are not on the frontline but in the back office. That is one of the things that most police forces have changed over the years, but there is clearly more scope for that to take place in Bedfordshire. Under a different police and crime commissioner—a Conservative police and crime commissioner—I am sure that it would.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I want to pick up on that point about the financial management of Labour police and crime commissioners. In the West Midlands, for instance, the Labour PCC, David Jamieson, has reported £100 million in reserves, yet he chose before the spending review to fire huge swathes of vital PCSOs in a highly politicised move and then had to reverse the decision after the spending review. The message is, “If you want to play politics with the police, vote Labour.”

Mrs May: I have to say that I agree with my hon. Friend. If we look at the figures, we see that the cash change in resource reserves since March 2014 in the West Midlands is £27 million. The choice has been made to put that money in reserve—into the bank balance—rather than into officers on the frontline.

Andy Burnham: I thank the Home Secretary for giving way one more time, because this is an important debate and people need the truth. They will have heard that she did not answer my last question about Home Office cash cuts to 36 police forces, so let me ask another question. She loves to read out what I said—5%, 10%—but I have already gone through what I said and the letter I wrote to her. Let us get the facts straight. Why did David Jamieson put forward those plans? It was because they were planning for the spending review. The Home Secretary was telling the police that they could expect 25% cuts. That is what she was telling them; that is what they were planning for. What happened to make her change her mind the day before the spending review, and back down on the 25% cuts that she was planning?

Mrs May: The right hon. Gentleman is trying to make an argument where there is none, because he knows full well the processes of determining the comprehensive spending review, and the discussions that take place between Departments and the Treasury that result in the final figures that the Chancellor announces. In truth, the Labour party decided what its line was going to be on police funding, and when the Chancellor
stood up and protected police budgets, instead of sensibly changing that line, it decided to carry on with it anyway because one should never let the facts get in the way of an argument.

The right hon. Gentleman argues that the inclusion of cybercrime in the crime statistics will show that crime has doubled, but the uncomfortable truth for the Opposition is that crime has fallen by more than a quarter since 2010, according to the independent crime survey for England and Wales. That is one of the most authoritative surveys of victims of crime in the world. It is administered by the independent Office for National Statistics, which captures the experience of more than 30,000 households. The survey dates back to the 1980s and shows that crime is at historic lows. People in this country are as safe as they have ever been.

The ONS has been clear: its preliminary estimate on fraud and cybercrime does not mean that crime is rising, and certainly not that it has doubled. In fact, it confirms what we have long known, which is that such crimes have for too long gone unreported and unrecorded. That is why the Government welcome the work of the ONS to capture those crimes.

The right hon. Gentleman notes the heightened threat of a terrorist attack and the important role of the police in preventing such attacks, and I will go on to speak about that.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The Chancellor is not present, but will the right hon. Lady confirm that his pledge to protect the police relies on an assumed increase of £369 million in local taxes?

Mrs May: I described accurately in my speech what was said about real-terms figures and maximising the precept, and that in cash terms there will be virtually a £900 million increase in funding for police budgets.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend surprised, as I am, that on the one hand Labour Members seem to be arguing that the Chancellor protected funding because of their campaign, and on the other hand that funding is going down?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—they cannot have it all ways, and that is exactly what the shadow Home Secretary is trying to argue. He is saying, “Isn’t it great? It is all because of us that police funding is protected—oooh, whoops, no, we think it’s going down.” He really needs to get his own lines straight before he stands up and speaks in this Chamber.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mrs May: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mrs May: I want to speak about terrorism so I hope the hon. Gentleman will excuse me. The threat from terrorism is real and growing. As I said when I was in Washington last week, the threat from Daesh requires us to act with greater urgency and joint resolve, both at home and internationally, more than ever before. An effective counter-terrorism response relies on the police and agencies working together with the right tools, capabilities and powers. That is precisely why the Government took the decision to protect overall police spending in real terms last autumn, why they have always supported neighbourhood policing as part of that joint effort, and why they protected counter-terrorism policing budgets and increased funding for the security and intelligence agencies. We are introducing vital legislation to ensure that the police and agencies continue to investigate crime and protect our national security in the digital age.

Stephen Doughty: I have spoken to the Home Secretary previously about this, and the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice was good enough to meet me recently to discuss the specific concerns facing Cardiff—as a capital city—and its neighbouring regions, particularly when dealing with the threat from terrorism. Will she look closely and generously at the specific needs facing Cardiff when she considers the resources that she is speaking about?

Mrs May: There are two aspects to this. There is the request that Cardiff has made for capital city grant, in the same way that London receives capital city grant. This has been looked at very carefully on a number of occasions. In overall policing terms, London has specific responsibilities and issues to address that are not reflected in Cardiff as a capital city. Separately, there is the whole question of counter-terrorism policing. The counter-terrorism policing budget is separate. We have been able to not just protect it but increase it for such issues as the provision of firearms officers. I recognise the points the right hon. Gentleman has made to me and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice about ensuring that proper counter-terrorism resource is available in the Cardiff area for policing.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I agree with the Home Secretary about the fight to combat terrorism. Safer neighbourhood teams have a pivotal role. In my constituency, the most diverse in the UK, we have lost 104 PCSOs. They cannot be replaced by volunteers. Does that concern the Home Secretary as much as it concerns me?

Mrs May: I will make two points to the hon. Lady. First, the percentage of officers in front-line duties has actually increased, I think from 89% to 92%, under this Government. Secondly, if we compare the actions of Labour police and crime commissioners with Conservative police and crime commissioners, Conservative PCCs have largely protected their local police officers, whereas Labour PCCs have been cutting them more significantly. I therefore suggest she looks at that.

Clive Efford: I therefore suggest she looks at that.
Even without the pressing financial imperative, however, the problems in policing were glaring. Police forces were bloated with bureaucracy. Officers’ productivity was held back by targets and red tape. Local policing priorities were dictated from Whitehall. Police pay and conditions were hopelessly out of date, and, while police forces were supposedly held to account by police authorities, in reality only 7% of the public knew that those unelected committees even existed.

We brought in a radical programme of police reform to transform inadequate structures and institutions, bringing much-needed changes to open up the workforce, reform pay and conditions, overhaul outdated systems and technology, and make policing properly accountable. We cut red tape and freed up about 4.5 million hours of police time, the equivalent of 2,100 full-time police officers. We took steps to root out the waste and inefficiency that existed in police procurement and IT. We set up the College of Policing to improve police standards and training. We established the National Crime Agency to co-ordinate the response to serious and organised crime.

In 2011, we introduced police and crime commissioners to bring real local accountability to policing in a way that was never possible under invisible and faceless police authorities. In just a few months’ time, the public will have the opportunity to hold policing in their area to account in the strongest way possible—at the ballot box. For those pioneering PCCs standing for re-election, they will be defending their record and will be judged on their record over the last three-and-a-half years. Those standing for the first time will be judged on their ideas to improve policing in their areas. All will have a direct, democratic mandate to hold their local police force to account, to cut crime and to keep people safe.

When I introduced my programme of reform, those on the Opposition Benches claimed it would lead to a perfect storm of more crime, lower confidence and less visible policing. However, thanks to the hard work of police officers and police staff, and thanks to the leadership of chief constables and police and crime commissioners up and down the country, none of those predictions has come true. As I said earlier, crime is down by more than any other to ensure that crime statistics are accurate and can be trusted by the public. In 2012, I transferred responsibility for crime statistics from the Home Office to the Office for National Statistics to ensure that was never possible under invisible and faceless police authorities, in reality only 7% of the public knew that those unelected committees even existed.

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I have made previously hidden and under-reported crimes a priority, and I hope Members of all parties will welcome the fact that today we see more victims of sexual and violent offences having the confidence to come forward and report those crimes. While crime has fallen, public confidence has been maintained and the proportion of police officers on the front line has increased.

**Debbie Abrahams** rose—

**Mrs May:** I give way to the hon. Lady.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Unfortunately, my constituents are not at all happy. Burglary has increased by 100% over the last year, according to police recorded crime figures. What is the Home Secretary doing to monitor the potential increase in vigilantism?

**Mrs May:** I am sorry, but I thought the hon. Lady said “invigilantism”. It is very clear—HMIC is very clear about it—that the police have the resources they need to do the job they need to keep people safe and secure. They are doing that on a day-to-day basis across the country. Public perceptions of crime are improving nationally and locally. Fewer people are worried about burglary, and more people believe the criminal justice system is effective.

**Neil Coyle** rose—

**Mrs May:** I am sorry, but I am conscious that there is only limited time for this debate, and I am coming to the end of my remarks.

As I said earlier, the proportion of officers on the front line has increased from 89% to 92% since March 2010. That has been achieved at the same time as we have set about the urgent task of repairing the country’s finances, reducing the deficit and ensuring the long-term health of our economy. That task is not yet finished. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made clear in the autumn statement, over the course of the last Parliament, we made huge progress in rescuing the economy. Now we must rebuild it and we must protect our economic security in an uncertain world. We must also ensure that we have the resources to respond to the growing and emerging threats that we face. We have done that by protecting police funding in real terms, once the local precept is taken into account.

This is not the first time that the right hon. Member for Leigh and his party have made tall claims about crime and public safety. In 2011, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) argued in this House that our reforms would lead to “a perfect storm” of higher crime, lower confidence and less visible policing. None of those predictions came true.

In 2012, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) said that the model of community policing was being denigrated by the Government. In fact, we have always supported a model of community policing, and we put PCCs in place to ensure that local priorities were taken into account. As I have just indicated, Conservative PCCs are doing a better job in that area than Labour PCCs are.

In 2013, the Labour party’s review of policing, led by Lord Stevens, warned of “a danger of the police being forced to retreat to a discredited model of reactive policing”.

As I have said, however, a greater proportion of officers are now on the front line. In 2014, the then Leader of the Opposition claimed that abolishing direct democracy through police and crime commissioners was a “sensible” saving. Yet in three months’ time, the Labour party will stand candidates in elections for every single police force area in the country.
In 2015, the Labour crime and justice manifesto suggested that “a further 30,000 police officers could be lost after the election under the Conservatives”.

HMIC has been clear, however, that every force has the resources it needs to deliver effective policing and to continue cutting crime.

Andy Burnham rose—

Mrs May: Given that it is the right hon. Gentleman, I will give way one last time, but I am virtually at the end.

Andy Burnham: I am very grateful to the Home Secretary. She has just said something that goes to the heart of our debate today. She said that the Government had protected police budgets in real terms, once the police precept is taken into account—she said something along those lines. Will she accept that that caveat was not in the Chancellor’s autumn statement?

Mrs May: No. I am sorry, but we have been through this, and I am not going to go over it again for the right hon. Gentleman.

At every release of the independent Crime Survey for England and Wales, the Labour party has ignored the most authoritative measure for crime in this country, because it does not show what it wants to show. As I said earlier, Labour decided what its campaign would be six years ago, and they have doggedly stuck to it ever since. They operate on the basis that if you say something enough times, people will believe it, regardless of the facts—[Interruption.] They ignore the evidence that points to lower crime, safer communities and police reform that is working. [Interruption.]

Neil Coyle rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Members must allow the Home Secretary to conclude her speech.

Mrs May: The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) may well be able to catch the eye of the Chair if he wishes to speak later.

There is an important debate to be had on policing in this country. It is a debate on how best to keep individuals, communities and businesses safe from crime, how best to ensure that the police can adapt to changing crime and emerging threats, and how best to drive better collaboration, joint working and local accountability in law enforcement and wider public services. I urge the shadow Home Secretary to focus on those issues, rather than repeating the same discredited claims that his predecessors repeated throughout the last Parliament. Keeping communities safe from crime, and ensuring that the police can adapt to that changing crime and those emerging threats, are what the public care about and what this Government will deliver.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many Members wish to speak, and we have only an hour left. After the spokesman for the Scottish National party has made his contribution, there will be a three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I assure Members that I have no intention of taking up any more time than is absolutely necessary.

Let me begin by echoing the words of the Home Secretary, and making it clear that my hon. Friends and I are forever thankful for the tireless work that our police services do on our behalf to keep our streets safe. They are indeed indispensable. Since my election, I have been hugely impressed by the officers whom I have met. They are all completely dedicated to protecting the public, which is how it should be. I think we need to make it clear in this debate that all police staff on both sides of the border have our full and unequivocal support as they go about their very important duties.

The motion is predicated on the Chancellor’s announcement in the autumn statement that police budgets in England and Wales would be fully protected. I well remember the waving of Order Papers and the near-hysteria of Conservative Members, who presumably thought that full protection was the right course of action; it certainly seemed to be their view. The occasion followed a Back-Bench police debate in which I led for the SNP. During that debate, Labour called for cuts to be restricted to 10%—or 5%; it depends on whom we believe today. The Government made no commitment that day, although, somewhat predictably, they outflanked the Labour party in the autumn statement.

As always with this Government, the devil may well be in the detail. We now learn—from a response to a written question, no less—that this much-celebrated protection may not extend to the transport, defence and nuclear police. I remember the Chancellor’s words clearly, and if the response to the written question is correct—and there seems to be some debate about that today—his statement could be described as disingenuous. Given that policing is devolved, it is not for me, or the SNP, to argue the points that are made in the motion. I merely point out that I witnessed the Chancellor’s assurances, and that in any area of policy, devolved or not, it is imperative that the public can rely on clear statements in this place.

The motion does not stipulate Scotland specifically, which is a pleasant surprise. Perhaps the Labour party is learning that bashing Scotland and her democratically elected Government does its electoral chances in Scotland no good whatsoever. My party will therefore abstain in the vote, and will leave the debate to the MPs from England and Wales. Accordingly, my comments will not take up too much time. I do not wish to restrict the right of England and Wales Members to a say.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when it comes to policing, it is not just a question of money but a question of structure? Will he acknowledge that the SNP Government made a mistake in reducing their police to a single force?

Richard Arkless: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the proposal was in the SNP manifesto, the Conservative manifesto, and the Labour manifesto at the last Scottish parliamentary election. It seems a bit rich to claim after the event that making the move was the wrong thing to do, given that all the parties were advocating such a move.
[Richard Arkless]

I am a Member of this House and my party is the third party in it. In that context, it is worth while briefly highlighting the approach that Scotland has taken to budget police cuts. I express my pride that the Scottish Government have done what is necessary to protect a commitment for 1,000 additional officers since 2007. That commitment has been delivered in full. We have delivered savings and maintained an impressive reduction in crime figures. We did it all in the face of the harsh austerity agenda against us. Most importantly, we kept officers on the streets, protecting communities effectively. Sure there have been challenges but all organisational upheaval of that extent will have those teething problems.

Since 2007 in Scotland, we have increased the number of officers by 6.3%, while in England and Wales in the same period the number has dropped by 10.8%. It is dangerous to risk security in that way, yet the Government insist on pursuing the line that they are making the UK safer. How you spend what you have and your spending priorities are often as important as the underlying spend. It is about time that the rest of the UK caught up with the standards set by the Scottish Government in achieving the lowest crime rate in four decades. We have driven savings and upheld the priority of combating new and more sophisticated forms of crime, including cybercrime, financial crime and terrorism. Having said that, I believe it is fundamentally unfair that the Scottish Police Authority has yet to be awarded the VAT status that every other police force in the UK enjoys. That alone would be enough to ease the burden on the force to the tune of £23 million.

Jake Berry: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has made clear to the Scottish Police Authority that it is unfair. Surely that cannot be right.

Richard Arkless: I can confirm that that was the case, but we made our protestations abundantly clear at that time, and we also made it clear that we would campaign on the issue. There is an old saying: if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, the chances are it is a duck. That looks unfair, it feels unfair and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that it is unfair. Surely that cannot be right.

Mr Speaker: I discern that the hon. Gentleman has finished his speech. We are very obliged to him.

6.2 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am pleased to see your happy countenance, Mr Speaker, for I rise depressed. I thought coming to this place that I would avoid tedious arguments about inputs and instead participate in a debate about results, policy and methods. In 2008, when I became deputy mayor for policing in London, I inherited a police force that had lost its way but was awash with cash. At that time in the capital, significant crime types were rising, not least teenage murder. During my four years, I helped, cajoled, bullied and persuaded the police to refocus at the same time as cutting significant amounts of money from the police budget. During that entire period crime fell, particularly some important crime types such as teenage murder. In my first year, there were 39. In my final year there were eight. It convinced me there and then that there is little connection between resource and output and results in policing. It is much more about focus.

What is depressing about the argument that the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) has made today is that it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of modern policing and modern crime. Government and many police and crime commissioners throughout the country are trying to refocus the police on some of the challenges that they face.

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned the Met he inherited in 2008. I would not argue that it was perfect, but does he accept that the Metropolitan police of 2008 were a universe away from the Metropolitan police of 1997, who failed properly to investigate the murder of Stephen Lawrence?

Kit Malthouse: I will accept that there have been significant changes in the Metropolitan police—that is absolutely right—but I think it is universally accepted that, when we got into office in 2008, under the then commissioner the force had lost focus. The point I am making is that it was not delivering while at the same time it was receiving significant budget increases. It was literally awash with cash. That position had to be corrected. That has to happen across the whole country.

In my entire time in the policing community, I never came across a police force that had adopted what are in many ways the four pillars needed for modern policing. The first of them is investment in intelligence. About 80% of the time the police know just about where, when and by whom a crime is going to be committed, yet they never invest as much as they should in intelligence. Technology is changing the face of crime fighting. Automatic number plate recognition, data analysis, facial recognition, advanced forensics: no police force in the UK invests enough in them.

I have yet to find a police force that measures the efficiency of investigation. Murder in London fell from a high of 211 back in 2005 to just 101 in my final year. Should we still be investing the same number of police officers in murder? Of course not. There has to be some kind of peace dividend and efficiency saving.

There is also innovation. If police forces are really going to grasp the challenges of the future, they have to invest in innovation. There is not a single police force in the country that has an innovation officer spreading new methods and techniques across the force.

Finally, I want to say a word on cybercrime. The right hon. Member for Leigh made much of that. It is a prime example of where technology is going to solve the problem. When I was a kid, anyone could open my grandad’s Mk2 Escort by thumping the door with their thigh. Now car crime is negligible in police terms because of changes in technology. Cars got better. The truth is that banks and financial services organisations invest in technology to prevent and detect crime, and the police have to do the same. One programmer—one smart programme—will solve more cybercrime than 1,000 police officers ever could; that is what I call efficiency.
Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you are known as the Back Bencher’s champion, and I hope the shadow Home Secretary will not feel I am criticising him too much, but I think that for him to have spent 35 minutes—over a quarter of the entire allocated time for this debate—on his speech is a discourtesy to Members on both sides who have come here to talk about this important issue.

I want just to say the following. My concern, and that of the Home Affairs Committee, is not so much about the settlement, because we said in our last report, published on 11 December, that the Chancellor was right to have done what he did, but that is only half the story. Our concern is over the funding formula. Of course the Policing Minister was right to look again at the formula and re-evaluate it, and we have noted the fact that that whole process ended in a shambles because of the Home Office’s failure to properly calculate the data, and it took an official in Devon and Cornwall to assess that something had gone wrong.

We published our report on 11 December. The Government’s response to this very important issue is now 13 days late. Chief constables and police and crime commissioners up and down the country have been waiting for this response, and for the consultation to begin. The fact is that unless we have the new formula, even the decisions made on the settlement will not give certainty to the various police forces in this country.

We had a letter from the Policing Minister in the middle of the last debate in which he said he was going to respond very swiftly, but there is a debate on Tuesday about the Committee’s report, by which time I hope we will have begun the consultation. Yesterday in our deliberations, five PCCs as well as Lord Wasserman gave evidence on PCCs, and they all said that none of them had been contacted by the Home Office about this critical issue. This has been mirrored in the emails we have received at the Committee office from other chief constables.

I ask the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister to ensure that when the Minister comes to wind up—I assume another half hour of this debate will be taken up with wind-ups—he should please tell us when the consultation process will begin. I hope he will use the examples we have given in our report so that there is an independent element to the consultation process. If that happens, we will get a formula that can be accepted by all the police forces in this country, and a formula that can remain in place for many years to come.

6.9 pm

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Robert Peel’s vision for the police was that “the police are the public and the public are the police”.

That could not be embodied any better than in the enormous contribution made by special constables to police forces across the country. The latest statistics show that 18,000 special constables were working alongside police officers and saving an estimated £75 million last year in man hours. It is impossible for anyone to speak in this debate without acknowledging the huge challenges that police forces have faced in relation to their budgets. In that environment, we are clearly going to place increasing reliance on special constables. They are volunteers who come from all walks of life and all backgrounds. If we were having a conversation with a special constable on the street, we probably could not tell him from any other officer. He is a warranted officer, he has had the same training and he stands shoulder to shoulder with other officers. Special constables are invaluable and they give up their free time to keep us safe on our streets.

With that in mind, I wanted to discuss the case of Andrew Blades, a constituent who was a special constable in Lancashire. He worked as a special for six years, giving more than 2,500 hours to the people in Rossendale, Darwen, Burnley and beyond in east Lancashire, keeping us safe. He moved an unmarked police car across a road to block the way of an oncoming unlicensed, un-MOTed, uninsured scrambler motorbike that had been terrorising the neighbourhood. We should be lauding him as a hero, because not only did he stop a crime being committed, but he protected a fellow officer. Unfortunately, however, his payment for that—for taking those brave, split-second decisions on our behalf as a volunteer—was to be prosecuted for dangerous driving, a case he admitted and for which he has been sentenced to a year’s ban.

The case was well covered in the newspapers and I wish to read out a comment from someone in an online newspaper. This person had probably come home from work and was looking at the online newspapers, and they said:

“It really isn’t often I feel outrage but tonight reading this story has left me outraged and speechless”. Guess what: I agree with him and so do 1,500 readers of the newspaper. When the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box, I would be grateful if he would take the opportunity to respond very swiftly, but there is a debate on Tuesday about the Committee’s report, by which time I hope we will have begun the consultation. Yesterday in our deliberations, five PCCs as well as Lord Wasserman gave evidence on PCCs, and they all said that none of them had been contacted by the Home Office about this critical issue. This has been mirrored in the emails we have received at the Committee office from other chief constables.

I ask the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister to ensure that when the Minister comes to wind up—I assume another half hour of this debate will be taken up with wind-ups—he should please tell us when the consultation process will begin. I hope he will use the examples we have given in our report so that there is an independent element to the consultation process. If that happens, we will get a formula that can be accepted by all the police forces in this country, and a formula that can remain in place for many years to come.

6.12 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Let me start by paying tribute to my local police, particularly Inspector Tom Horner. He works tirelessly, along with his team, to keep my community and my constituents safe, as does the regional police force. West Yorkshire’s force has lost a considerable amount of funding and more than 20% of its officers, and it is now likely to be asked to find savings, despite having a “protected budget”.

Bradford is not like the leafy suburbs of some southern counties where funding has increased over the past six years. We deal with complex issues that create vulnerability. In the past few weeks, we saw the conviction of 12 people from a grooming gang in Keighley, and such cases affect the wider budget of a local police force. In our area, we have to deal with terrorism and with women who have fled with their children to Syria.

What I want from the Home Secretary today is an explanation of how she and the Chancellor will ensure that he will take all these complexities into account, including terrorism, alcohol, domestic violence and mental health issues. On the one hand, cuts mean austerity, which has an impact on people’s lives within their homes, while on the other there is an increase in poverty and crime: there is a correlation. We cannot deny that.
[Naz Shah]

I would really like to understand how this Government are going to ensure that they take into account places like my constituency, where the issues are complex: we need extra funding to tackle terrorism and we have extra vulnerabilities. We are also looking at integration, as just a few weeks ago Britain First came to my area, and the English Defence League has also been. I worked closely with the police on both occasions. I am not convinced that the police funding formula will address all the issues, and that is my real concern. I would like to see some understanding of constituencies such as Bradford West. Ultimately, we need to be cutting crime, not cutting costs.

6.14 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The police seem to be a popular subject in this House, as we have discussed them on several occasions, and I must say Labour’s arguments have not really moved on. Today’s debate gives me an opportunity to reiterate some comments and observations that I have made in previous such debates. It is important that we now look forward and not back. There are two key issues, one of which is financial and the other more general. The first is the police funding formula and the future consultation, and the second is leadership and innovation within police forces—new ideas and new thinking between them and within them.

On the police funding formula, the previous proposals were clearly not particularly popular in Cumbria. In fact, they would have had a devastating effect on the Cumbrian police force. I was very pleased when they were changed, because the support for retaining the Cumbrian police force is extremely strong within Cumbria. Therefore, the funding formula matters. If Cumbria is to retain an independent police force, the funding formula must be set out in a way that makes it financially viable. Under the proposed funding formula, that was clearly not the case, which is why I welcome the new consultation.

I accept that there are other possibilities. I referred earlier to the implementation of the Scottish formula, which saw the number of forces going down from eight to one. I think it is recognised that that was flawed and a mistake. In England, there are 43 forces. I know that there is a view that some of those could be merged or amalgamated, but that is not appropriate for Cumbria.

Cumbria is a large county in which local knowledge really does matter. It has a small population of half a million people. The terrain is challenging and the infrastructure poor, and the distance to major urban centres is considerable. As I have always said, the key issues are rurality and sparsity, and I very much hope that they will be central to the consultation on the funding formula going forward.

On leadership and innovation, I genuinely believe that the election of police and crime commissioners has been an innovative and successful policy. It has been great for Cumbria. Richard Rhodes has been an excellent PCC. As we move forward, new PCCs will be elected and others will be re-elected. Things will improve, as PCCs innovate and bring the police force into the 21st century. I completely support the Government in that policy. I look forward to the new consultation, and we must make sure that a Cumbrian police force continues to exist.

6.17 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Many of my hon. Friends have spoken about the cuts to their local police force areas. Since 2010, the Northumbria police force has suffered some of the worst financial cuts of any force in the UK. I want to use what little time I have to share some of my personal stories, which show just how fantastic our police really are.

In my previous career as a child protection social worker, I was followed home by violent clients and, as a result, had security measures in my home. I was placed on high alert with the local police station and taken to and from work under secure guard.

I remember being pinned against the wall by an angry father while holding his screaming child in my arms. I remember being jumped on, attacked and punched in the face by another parent. I remember the terror of being in a house filled with more than 20 men, all drunk and high on drugs, as I was trying to rescue a young baby who was crawling around the floor, unclothed, among the broken glass, alcohol, ash and drug remnants. Her mother and all of the men were in my face shouting at me, making threats and blocking my exit from the home.

I remember vividly—I wish that I did not—every child and adult who ever disclosed emotional, physical and sexual abuse to me. The one constant in all of those situations was the police. For anyone who has ever been in a dangerous or frightening situation, the relief felt at the sound and sight of police arriving on the scene is almost impossible to put into words. That is often the unseen side of our police force, a side that many of us, thankfully, will never have to encounter. Every day, officers are doing that work, making our communities safer, protecting children and adults from harm and working collaboratively with other agencies.

In our area we have lost 762 officers, against the backdrop of a 60% increase in sexual offences and a 29% increase in violent crime. Our excellent police and crime commissioner, Vera Baird, and her team of officers are doing a sterling job of managing the cuts and protecting our communities, but they desperately need a fairer settlement. If I was in my old job, that level of cuts would worry me. Response times and capacity were vital in the stories that I have just briefly shared with the House, and I know better than most that I can always rely on our police. It is a shame that the police cannot rely on this Government.

6.20 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I have listened intently to the Labour party’s propositions and arguments, and I am stunned and, frankly, disappointed by the one-sided and misleading portrayal of this issue. The shadow Home Secretary talked about cuts to services, cuts to funding and cuts to the police, but he totally ignored the remarkable cut in crime that this country has seen since 2010. Crime has fallen by about 25% since 2010. He challenged the crime survey statistics, but all the independent reports and all the facts show the same decline in crime, with a fall of more
than 25%. The statistics from the Office for National Statistics are clear that the crime rate is now 64% below its peak in 1995.

Those figures are backed up in the regions. For example, in Hampshire, my county, we have seen an 11% drop in crime over the past year alone, making a fall of more than 30% since 2010. A recent study from Cardiff University showed a 10% fall in the number of people seeking treatment for violent crime injuries in hospital accident and emergency departments, which again reinforces the downward trend in violent crime.

The shadow Home Secretary says that those statistics are overshadowed by the rise in cybercrime, so let us look at what the Government are doing to tackle cybercrime. I sat on the Joint Committee on the Draft Investigatory Powers Bill, which had 22 public evidence sessions and received thousands of pages of written evidence. We visited and met professionals on the frontline. The Bill will provide vital powers and necessary transparency and accountability to our online forces. Having talked to the professionals and listened to what they want, I can say that they want more powers to intercept online communications, interfere with equipment and track internet connection records.

Last week we heard about paedophiles using secret Facebook groups to exchange imagery online and terrorists using WhatsApp, text and email to carry out their crimes. Although the technology is welcome, we need to ensure that encryption is not used against our law enforcement services, which are struggling to keep up with the criminals. The Bill will provide vital powers to ensure that they can tackle cybercrime. To echo the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), it focuses on methodology and technique rather than just throwing cash at the problem. That is what the professionals on the frontline want and what they are asking for, and that is what this Government are delivering.

6.23 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is becoming increasingly apparent that we are not safe with the Tories. With underinvestment in the NHS, social care and local roads, with what is happening to the environment and the economy, and with the downward pressure on the pound, we are under threat from the Tories. We are not safe with them. Now, in our communities, there are attacks on the police, and all the Prime Minister can do is refer to the Leader of the Opposition’s tie. How pathetic is that?

The hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) talked about intelligence playing a crucial role in the police service. Of course it does, and significant amounts of that intelligence, certainly in my police force, come from neighbourhood policing, which is under the cosh. He talked about intelligence being important, but the very service that helps significantly with that at the neighbourhood level is under threat.

The hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) talked about special constables. They do a fantastic job, but they are additional to, not instead of, the police—that is absolutely crucial.

Jake Berry: My grandfather spent 25 years patrolling the streets of Bootle as a police officer, and he would say—as I would—that we must focus on ensuring that police officers are on the streets of Bootle, not sat behind desks in police headquarters doing work that non-warranted individuals can do.

Peter Dowd: I am really pleased that the hon. Gentleman says that, because I was just coming to that very point in relation to Merseyside police. A fantastic job is being done by the police and crime commissioner, Jane Kennedy; the chief constable, John Murphy; and my local commander, Peter Costello, and all his officers, who spend as much time as they can on the streets, against the odds.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend says that, because he was just coming to that very point in relation to Merseyside police. A fantastic job is being done by the police and crime commissioner, Jane Kennedy; the chief constable, John Murphy; and my local commander, Peter Costello, and all his officers, who spend as much time as they can on the streets, against the odds.

Peter Dowd: I completely agree, and it surprises me that there are not even more police officers off with stress, given the pressures they are under.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) referred to the cumulative effect of the cuts to local government and local services such as the fire service on the police’s ability to do their job. That endangers the resilience of the police service, because officers are being taken away to do things that are not their responsibility. Huge amounts of their time are taken up with mental health cases because of the stress on local authorities and the NHS, and that should not be the case.

In 2010, we had 7,300 police officers in my area; that is now down by 1,600. We are not making those figures up; the police and crime commissioner, the chief constable and the local commanders are not making them up, and they are not just taking those officers out of the system because they feel like it.

What we have with this Government is jiggery-pokery finance and jiggery-pokery figures. For years, we were told we really could not put the council tax precept up by more than 2%, but the Chancellor of the Exchequer is now almost demanding that in relation to social care, and the Home Secretary is virtually demanding it. [Interruption.] She may well laugh, but that is the reality. She and her colleagues have told us over the years that we are spending too much through tax, but they then demand, for the sake of the Chancellor’s jiggery-pokery economics, that we put the put the precept up by 2%. That amounts to a fiddle; as my right hon. Friend said, it would amount to fraud in other circumstances, and those involved would be arrested.

My local police and crime commissioner has used £2.1 million of reserves, and there are now another £3.3 million of savings to be made, with £27 million of savings to be made by 2019-20. We also have to contend with the deferred blunder in the formula, which will come back to haunt us.

At the same time, crime is up. Hate crime is up, sexual offences are up, violent crime against women is up and
knife crime is up. We will have to face those increases with less and less financial and human resource, notwithstanding the fact that Merseyside police service collaborates with the fire service in a joint command and control centre. We are doing what we can, but the police service can only do so much.

The Scottish Nationalist party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless), asked how what happens with the British Transport police, the Ministry of Defence police and the Civil Nuclear Constabulary will interplay with the effects on local forces. We need more answers.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that those of us who work in this building every day—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) extended a generosity that it was not within his capacity to grant. It was very decent of him, but he gave time that he did not possess.

6.29 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) for opening this debate and allowing me to contribute. We have been able to take part in a very active and constructive debate.

As much as we talk about numbers, it is important that we talk about the crux of the issue, which is how it affects the people we are here to represent and their everyday experience of the changes to the police service. I have wondered throughout the debate what the Home Secretary thinks is the measure of success, because I am struggling to understand it. We talk about police numbers, which are important for some but not for others. We talk about crime figures, and some will say they are accurate and some will say not. We talk about the number of police stations and facilities, but are they important or not? It is very difficult for me and for a lot of people in the community to fully understand what on earth is going on with policing in this country.

I can say, though, that in Greater Manchester the number of police cut is now over 2,000. The Minister knows that, because the House of Commons Library has provided that information and so it is on the public record, but he might not know that the number of police stations in Oldham borough has gone down dramatically. The police station in Royton has closed, the police station in Failsworth has closed, the Limeside police post has closed, the Chadderton police post has closed, Uppermill police station has been downgraded, and the custody cells at Oldham police station have been closed. On top of that—of course, justice is not isolated to the police—the magistrates court and the county court are closing. The Minister will not know how many police stations are closing in Oldham, because when I wrote to the Home Office to ask whether it collated information on that, it said it did not, so it does not even know how many police stations are open. That is very significant. Tomorrow, the police station in Failsworth will be sold to the highest bidder at public auction. The irony is that just down the road is Failsworth lodge, which Sir Robert Peel attended to be taught as a private school-educated youngster, and now the police station in that town is being sold.

Crime is up by 14% in Greater Manchester. Sexual offences are up by 46%, violent crime is up by 36%, shoplifting is up by 9%, vehicle crime is up by 8%, and theft is up by 5%—little wonder, with fewer police and fewer police stations, and £200 million taken from Greater Manchester police. Were it not for the police and crime commissioner, Tony Lloyd—a fantastic advocate for policing—and the hard-working and dedicated police officers, the situation would no doubt be far worse. It cannot continue, because on top of all that we have lost community centres, youth centres and youth workers. We talk about prevention, and that community infrastructure is absolutely crucial for finding out what is happening on the ground to help the police service do what it does best.

6.32 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I want to pay tribute to the hard work of the police in my constituency, which often goes above and beyond the call of duty. In addition to investigating crime, apprehending criminals and keeping us safe, in the current context of cuts to other public services, the police are too often the service of last resort for residents with severe mental illness and other vulnerabilities. Yet in London our hard-working officers are being let down and undermined by the current Mayor. We have seen enormous cuts to policing in London over the past five years, with the loss of more than 5,600 uniformed officers, including PCSOs.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept from me—I spent 32 years as a police officer—that the issue with mental health is not a new phenomenon but has always been the case?

Helen Hayes: The officers in my constituency tell me that the problem is more acute at the moment than it has been for many, many years, and that is my experience.

While I welcome the change in recruitment policy by the Metropolitan police to recruit only Londoners, the cuts are clearly limiting the progress that this policy has the potential to make in terms of black and minority ethnic representation in the Met, which still stands at only 11.5%. Much of the reduction in officer numbers is being achieved by not replacing retiring officers. Without new recruitment, the diversity of the Met will continue to lag behind that of the population it serves.

The devastating cuts have had a major impact. Every police officer I speak to is stretched more than they can ever recall having been in their working lives. Violent crime is going up, and last week HMIC announced that the Met requires improvement. Of all the reforms that the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has made, the reorganisation of safer neighbourhood policing into the local policing model is the most damaging. Through that reform, the police are losing visibility, vital sources of intelligence and the ability to address minor problems before they escalate.

The Dulwich area of my constituency was recently dubbed the UK’s burglary hotspot on the basis of data from insurance claims relating to burglary. I have spoken
to many residents who have been the victim of that terrible crime in recent months. Many have had windows and doors smashed in during broad daylight. In one shocking attack, a resident had the contents of a petrol canister poured over him. In that context, our local police have been forced to be reactive instead of proactive, visiting the victims after the crimes had taken place and responding to emergency call-outs. However, a proactive approach, through neighbourhood policing, is vital to addressing some of the most serious and pressing challenges that we face, such as gun and youth crime, sexual exploitation, radicalisation and terrorism, forced marriage and honour-based violence. To investigate and prevent those crimes, the police require a depth of knowledge and relationship with the communities that they serve, which cannot be fabricated in the heat of a rapid response once a crime has been committed.

One community activist in Brixton, who has engaged with the police for many years, said at a Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime roadshow meeting that the erosion of safer neighbourhood teams had "taken the heart out of policing".

Margaret Greenwood: Neighbourhood policing, which is the eyes and ears of policing, is important in tackling terrorism. Every day, Members of the House walk past crime scene monitors that tell us that the level of threat is “severe”. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is the wrong time to be making cuts to our police?

Helen Hayes: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. When communities know their officers and officers know their patch, the police have a public face at a local level. When that is taken away, public confidence all too often depends on headlines, high-profile cases and the individual experiences of people who have, sadly, already been the victims of crime. Neighbourhood policing should not be regarded as the softer side of policing. It should be regarded not as a luxury to be cut in a time of austerity, but as a vital relationship-building bridge between the police and the communities that they serve, and as the key to resolving and preventing many of the serious crimes that can threaten the security and stability of our communities.

Naz Shah: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which supports the case that I am making. In London, we need a Labour Mayor to restore neighbourhood policing, as my hon. Friend has just said, as a cornerstone of the Met.

HMIC recognises that neighbourhood policing is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) has said, the cornerstone of crime prevention. That is something that the front-line police service have been telling Government for years. Neighbourhood policing enables officers to serve the public, remain vigilant to threats, gather the most accurate intelligence about terrorism and gain crucial local-to-global intelligence, whether for use in the fight against terror or the fight against child sexual exploitation.

To turn specifically to Wales, a really concerning picture is developing. Last week, HMIC concluded in its report that Dyfed-Powys police could do more to keep people safe and to reduce crime. Its report on police effectiveness found that the approach to investigating crimes and supporting the vulnerable and victims required improvement. It also highlighted Dyfed-Powys’s allocation of complex crimes, sexual offences and high-risk domestic abuse to officers who did not have adequate training.

Across Wales, we have seen a reduction of 783 police officers and even more support staff. Those cuts are akin to wiping three quarters of the entire Gwent police force off the face of the map. Police are now going back into offices to do administrative work. Such work has to be done and cannot be ignored—it is crucial to how policing works—but police officers need to be on the streets to build trust and relationships with local communities.

In Wales, the Welsh Government have created 500 PCSOs not to replace police officers, but to backfill the gaps left by the 20% cuts to policing imposed by the Government since 2010. HMIC has stated that cuts should not be more than 12%, but that has been ignored by the previous coalition and the current Government. The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice has said that “Chief Constables and Police and Crime Commissioners have no excuse whatsoever not to deliver at least good quality policing in their areas.”

I think that they have every excuse, given the cuts to their budgets. South Wales police, in my own area, will have a cash cut of nearly £3.5 million in real terms in its budget for 2016-17, compared with last year.

The police are now spread so thinly that they are struggling to act as eyes and ears on our streets, which undermines their ability to do their job. At the same time, the Home Secretary is talking about risks to national security and the threat from terrorism is at an extreme level.

Steve McCabe: I agree with my hon. Friend that such threats are multiplying. The Home Secretary suggested earlier that crime was down and all was well, but she seems to have overlooked the fact that violent crime is actually rising and that in some parts of the country—Birmingham, for example—gun crime is rampant. Is this not the wrong time to cut special resources for policing?
Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Knife crime has gone up again this year, and we have seen the figures released last week.

The police are now spread so thinly that they cannot do their job. We talk about risks and threats to national security and efforts to counter the threat we face from terrorism. This is a time when we need more police, not less. There is only one thing that you get for less—and that is less.

6.42 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Neighbourhood policing was one of Labour's greatest achievements—a proud legacy. When we were in government, we built on the British model of policing by consent. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) was absolutely right to say that when Labour left office, there were record numbers of police on the street: 17,000 more than in 1997 and, in addition, nearly 17,000 PCSOs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said, neighbourhood policing is popular with the public. It is local policing with local roots, underpinned by local crime and safety partnerships, and it provides a local say.

The British model of policing is now under threat, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) rightly said. The HMIC report by Zoë Billingham describes how neighbourhood policing is “the cornerstone of the British policing model”.

However, she says: “I need to raise a warning flag here.” She goes on to talk about the dangers “if neighbourhood policing is further eroded.” She warns against losing “our eyes and ears in the community”.

Crucially, she singles out her concern about limiting the ability of neighbourhood policing teams to identify and disrupt threats such as organised crime and terrorism. Indeed, both the current head of counter-terrorism and the inspector of constabulary Zoe Billingham, but she actually said: “We don’t think it should be inevitable that the preventative neighbourhood presence should be eroded”, because the Government’s funding settlement for the police means there is an opportunity for the police to review their decision.

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman quotes Her Majesty’s inspector of constabulary Zoë Billingham, but she actually said: “We don’t think it should be inevitable that the preventative neighbourhood presence should be eroded”, because the Government’s funding settlement for the police means there is an opportunity for the police chiefs “to review their decision”.

Jack Dromey: The Home Secretary can, if she wishes, misinterpret what the report says. I have reported the inspector’s warnings that she is ignoring. The Government are ignoring the warnings from the police and the mounting concern of the public that they no longer see police.

Having cut the police service by 25% in the last Parliament, right up until the night before the comprehensive spending review, the Government were threatening to cut it by at least another 22%. With the Home Secretary failing to stand up for the police service, we were on the brink of catastrophe, but under pressure from Labour, the public and the police, the Chancellor staged, in what can only be described as a shambles, a last-minute U-turn and a promise was made: “Read my lips,” he intimated.

“I am today announcing that there will be no cuts in the police budget at all. There will be real-terms protection for police funding. The police protect us, and we are going to protect the police.”—[Official Report, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1373.]

That promise to the public and the police has been broken. The Chancellor said he would protect the police, but now we know that police budgets are still being cut—a broken promise. It is just like in 2010 when the Prime Minister said that he would protect the frontline. Since then, 12,000 front-line officers have been lost—a broken promise. To add insult to injury, not only are the Tories continuing to slash police funding, but they expect the public to pay more to make up for it. The Tory sums rely on local people being charged an extra £389 million in council tax—a Tory police tax. The public are paying more for less.

The shadow Secretary of State, and my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and other Members spoke of the reality in the communities that they serve. Neighbourhood policing is being hollowed out: 18,000 officers have gone and 4,500 PCSOs have been lost in the last five bleak years. Some 1,300 have gone in the last six months alone—the equivalent of a whole force—and many more will go over the next 12 months. Hugh Orde was right when he said that a generation of progress is being reversed.

There has been a major increase in knife crime, which is up by 9%, and a 10% rise in violent crime, including a 14% increase in the murder rate; sexual offences have gone up by 36% and reported rape is at its highest level since 2003; and victims are being let down without a suspect being identified. Resources are diminishing just when demand is soaring. Police in the 21st century face the triple challenges of terrorism, cybercrime and child sexual exploitation. The threats to British security in the 21st century demand a modernised, more responsive and better equipped police service, not a smaller one.

The shambles of the comprehensive spending review was followed by the omnishambles over the funding formula, in which the Home Office used the wrong figures to misallocate hundreds of millions of pounds of police funding, meaning that the doomed review of the unfair funding formula has been delayed for a further year. “Sorry,” said the Policing Minister, “we used the wrong figures and we should have got it right.” That means that there is a stopgap settlement for only a year—more uncertainty and more unfairness. West Midlands police, my local force, and Northumbria police will continue to receive double the cuts that Surrey receives.

The truth is that police budgets have not been protected. The truth is that crime is not falling, but changing. People are now more likely to be mugged online than in the street, yet in the words of the Office for National Statistics, “fraud and cyber crime are not currently included in the headline Crime Survey for England and Wales estimates”.

They will now be included. The ONS states: “Preliminary results from this field trial indicate that there were an estimated 5.1 million incidents of fraud.”
When the statistics finally tell the truth on crime, we will see crime nearly doubled under this Government, robbing them of the alibi they have used over the past five years: “We have cut the police, but we have cut crime.”

In conclusion, the thin blue line is being stretched ever thinner. Our police service has been nothing short of heroic. The powerful contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) showed the day in, day out experience we all have. I see it in my constituency, ranging from, on the one hand, outstanding initiatives to engage young people, such as the formation by the police of a canoeing club that built excellent relationships with local young people and that helped to divert them from crime and helped to get information about those who were carrying out burglaries, to, on the other hand, the case of Lucy Lawton, a young mum who had her two children kidnapped by a fleeing bank robber—they were tracked down and the kids were returned to their distraught mother. These are good men and women, ordinary men and women doing extraordinary things, often in the most difficult circumstances, but they are being let down by this Government. Now is not the time to press ahead with the biggest cuts to any police service in Europe. The safety and security of our citizens comes first. That is why Labour, the party that built neighbourhood policing, will be the champion of neighbourhood policing and the champion of public safety and the police.

6.50 pm

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): I was laughing at the shadow Policing Minister, Mr Speaker, and I apologise for doing so as this is a very serious day and a very serious debate. Like the Home Secretary, I pay tribute to the emergency services that are still on the scene at the former power station at Didcot. I spoke to the chief fire officer earlier today and, on behalf of the House, expressed gratitude for the work that they are doing at the incident, which is very harrowing for them as well as for the loved ones of those who are still missing and those who have been injured and killed.

I listened carefully to the speeches made by the shadow Home Secretary and by the shadow Policing Minister. I think that I might have heard his speech before—perhaps before the election, before the shadow Home Secretary wanted a 10% cut to policing, or perhaps I heard it last week, and perhaps I will hear it again next week. The shame about having this debate, curtailed as it is, is that we will have a debate next week, led by the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, on the Committee’s report. I bet that I hear an almost identical speech then from the shadow Policing Minister.

When we look carefully at what the Labour party is saying, we can see that on the one hand they are saying that we should have allowed cuts of 10% to policing until 2020 whereas, on the other hand, we hear speeches galore from Labour Back Benchers saying, “These cuts are not good.” What cuts? The cuts that happened between 2010 and 2015? Or those that would have happened had this country been foolish enough to elect a Labour Government?

The shadow Home Secretary is trying to say that we should not have taken into consideration the precept that is allowed—the 2% or 5%. Every Home Secretary has done that and every Chancellor has done that, when we look at how we fund the police. All of a sudden, we have a completely different narrative—“We want to cut it, and we want to cut it even more.” It fascinated me.

Andy Burnham rose—

Mike Penning: No, I will not give way. I am afraid that the shadow Home Secretary went on for far too long, as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee said. Perhaps next week we might hear the same speech again.

Neil Coyle rose—

Mike Penning: If I have time, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman. He has a very important constituency issue that I have been trying to help him with and I will give way if I have time.

It is very important that we also take into consideration what was said by the third party in this House, the Scottish National party, complaining about the fact that VAT at 20% is not allowed to be deducted. It was part of the business plan when the SNP put the plan together for one force in Scotland. That was physically part of the plan. Is this a new type of politics that is happening in Scotland, in which the SNP put a business plan together, get agreement, and afterwards say that it does not like it and wants to change it—a bit like with a referendum that took place not so long ago, which it is not very happy with either?

I listened very carefully to the Opposition spokesmen, especially the shadow Policing Minister, who made a very powerful case for canoeing activities in his constituency—

Jack Dromey: For the prevention of crime.

Mike Penning: Absolutely, so perhaps the police and crime commissioner could explain why he has not spent part of the £153 million reserve in the West Midlands on that. Perhaps we should look at the polling in May when, as we have heard, the Labour party will have candidates in all 43 PCC areas. In its manifesto it said that it would not do that—it was going to abolish PCCs because they were wrong, expensive and unnecessary. It did not want them.

Jack Dromey rose—

Mike Penning: No. Perhaps Paddy Tipping and Vera Baird convinced the Labour party that they would not accept being abolished. It is entirely up the electorate in England and Wales who to elect, but we should look carefully at the record of some PCCs around the country, especially Labour PCCs, where the cuts to front-line police have been the greatest.

Jack Dromey rose—

Mike Penning: No. Perhaps we should look carefully at the only force in the country that is cutting the precept—Hertfordshire, in my part of the world. Why is it cutting it? Because part of the reserves that have been built up over the years will be used.

Jim McMahon rose—
Mike Penning: I will not give way.

We have complaints when we use the precept, and complaints when we cut it. We should be talking about what is delivering the best policing in this country. Has crime dropped since 2000? Yes. For the first time we have a Conservative Government who have the courage to include new types of crime in the statistics. These crimes have not just suddenly appeared in 2010 or 2015. They have been going on for years, but the previous Labour Administration refused to include them in the statistics. Will it be difficult for some forces? Yes, it will. Is it the right thing to do? Yes, and that is crucial.

We have heard today quite a lot of scaremongering. There has been an increase in reporting domestic violence—quite rightly, I hope we will all agree. Every time I am at this Dispatch Box I say that we want people to have the confidence to come forward and report domestic violence, and it was not being reported correctly when we first came to government. We changed the reporting rules for how crime is reported.

Jake Berry: In the short time remaining, will the Minister address my concerns about what further protections can be given to special constables, and say whether the Government will act to extend the protection of the Police Federation to them?

Mike Penning: I was just coming on to special constables, because they were derided by the Opposition. Volunteers—what a terrible thing to have in a police force! Our specials are the most important people in the community. They come forward and do not get paid and only receive expenses. In my constituency, a special was attacked when on duty one evening. They laid his leg across the kerb, jumped on it and snapped his leg. The sort of protection that we should have—we will look at this, because it is vital—should mean that a special constable or a warranted officer has exactly the same protection as any other police officer in this country, and I speak weekly with the Police Federation about that.

I will respond as soon as I can to the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), because I want to get this right. A lot of work is going on, particularly with the chief constables, about how we can get better collaboration on capabilities going forward. It is not possible to come up with new formulas until I have not spoken to all 43 since the report, but I will ensure that I meet them all.

On Monday I have been asked to go to Didcot by the chief fire officer to thank the emergency services, and I am sure the whole House will join me in that. I hope that the country and the House will not listen to scaremongering from Labour Members who wanted to cut police funding by 10% or more.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 193, Noes 279.
NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Alkins, Victoria
Baconn, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Beijing, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Norwich, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burt, rh Alastair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umrun, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keun
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Web, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel
Cartridge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleaverly, James
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djagnogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Downen, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Fick
Dudridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evens, Graham
Evens, rh Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gillian, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Gove, rh Michael
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griifiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gymiah, Mr Sam
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloway, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Sir Roger
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwnzi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainer, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, rh Sir Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCarteney, Jason
McCarteney, Karl
Mckartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Newton, Sarah
Nutall, Mr David
Oficina, Dr Matthew
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swain, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shıəlehs
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Jaccie Doyle-Price and Guy Opperman

Question accordingly negatived.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (29 FEBRUARY)

Ordered,
That, at the sitting on Monday 29 February:

(1) the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Secretary Philip Hammond relating to the draft European Union Referendum (Date of Referendum etc.) Regulations 2016; the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of the Motion not later than two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion; and proceedings on the Motion may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption;

(2) paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to any Motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition; proceedings on the Motion may continue, though opposed, for three hours and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and (3) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to any Motion to which paragraph (1) or (2) of this order applies.—(George Hollingbery.)

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL

Ordered,
That, at the sitting on Wednesday 2 March, any Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill ordered to be brought in and read the first time may be proceeded with as if its Second Reading stood as an Order of the Day, and Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills) shall apply.—(George Hollingbery.)

Katie Road NHS Walk-in Centre

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

7.12 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Tonight I am seeking an opportunity to shed some light on the continuing saga of the Katie Road NHS walk-in centre in my constituency. Its future status has been in doubt ever since its fate was placed in the hands of one of the new clinical commissioning groups. My constituents have had to live with rumours, off-consultations and continuing threats to the long-term future of an immensely popular and highly valued service that sees about 70,000 patients a year. The origins of the service lie in concerns that the large number of students in the area, as well as vulnerable individuals—often with mental health conditions and in unstable accommodation—were placing a demand on GP services that could not be met by existing provision, which was in turn placing intolerable strains on the local accident and emergency services.

My own fairly extensive consultations with constituents have established that the centre is regularly used by those who cannot easily secure quick appointments with their own GP. That is often a problem for those in work—especially those who work unsocial hours—and for families with elderly relatives or young children who cannot easily gain access to GPs at weekends or in the evenings. The Katie Road centre sees about 300 to 400 patients during an average weekend.

There is now fairly widespread recognition of the value of walk-in centres. The 2014 Monitor review reported rising demand for the service year on year. About 70% of the centres that were surveyed reported that they were seeing an average of 20,000 to 45,000 patients a year, as opposed to anticipated attendances of between 12,000 and 24,000. Yet despite the demand and support for walk-in centres, local commissioners have closed more than 50 since the start of 2010, reduced services at 23 others and reduced overall capacity by about 20%. I am not aware that, other than the Monitor report, there has been any substantial review into the impact of that loss of provision. I wonder whether the Minister is in a position to enlighten me, and whether he might take this opportunity to say what the Government's position is on urgent care generally and walk-in centres in particular. I noticed that the Department of Health consultation “Refreshing the Mandate” says that “we want to improve people's access to primary care through new forms of provision including rapid walk-in access.”

In early 2013, Birmingham CrossCity clinical commissioning group announced plans to consult on the future of the Katie Road walk-in centre. That was apparently based on a report commissioned by the former South Birmingham primary care trust, a report that remains secret to this day. I first asked to see a copy of it in March 2013. In June 2013, the CCG called off its plans for walk-in centres and it was announced that they had been saved, only for the chair of the clinical commissioning group to reveal later that it planned to renew the contract temporarily and that Katie Road had been saved for 12 to 18 months. Later, the CCG announced that it planned a two-stage consultation, with a pre-consultation phase and then a main consultation with the public.
Naturally, I wanted to ensure that my constituents had their say on the matter. When I consulted them, I discovered that more than 72% had experience of using the centre and were firmly opposed to any plans to close it.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): I agree that walk-in centres have the ability to take pressure off overworked A&Es, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that the best way to take pressure not just off A&Es but walk-in centres is to have GP surgeries open seven days a week, so that people can access services overall?

Steve McCabe: I might agree with that, but one of the problems in my area is that GP surgeries have been cut as well, so that is not the answer.

As I said, more than 72% of the people I consulted had experience of using the centre and were firmly opposed to any plans to close it. I also found that 56% of people had used the centre for out-of-hours emergency treatment, and 55% expressed serious concern about any plans to move the service to or near the A&E unit. My findings are consistent with that of the survey conducted on behalf of the NHS central midlands commissioning support unit in 2012, which found that more than two thirds of patients surveyed at eight walk-in centres and urgent care centres across Birmingham and Solihull indicated that they had attended because of an access-related issue—for example, they could not get an appointment with their GP or had to wait a considerable time to be seen.

There were major objections from my constituents to relocating their walk-in centre to the main hospital. They referred, for example, to the distance, waiting times, parking and accessibility. During a visit to Katie Road, I witnessed an ambulance crew bring into the walk-in centre an elderly lady in need of stitches to a leg injury. They did that rather than take her to the A&E unit because of their concerns over the likely delays. The CCG’s own figures suggest that an average visit to the walk-in centre costs around £45, as opposed to £75 to £100 for an A&E visit.

I am aware that there are many examples of walk-in centres being co-located with other health or social care services, and that some have a pharmacy on site or are co-located with diagnostic services such as X-ray services, dental facilities or family planning, but I should like to ask the Minister whether there is any evidence that shows an obvious advantage in co-locating an urgent care or walk-in centre alongside an A&E unit, especially evidence that would outweigh such negatives as distance, waiting times, parking and accessibility. In fact, is it not the case that most walk-in centres have a limited ability to refer patients on to secondary care services, as patients needing a referral to secondary care are normally referred by GPs, who are the traditional gatekeepers—a role that has, if anything, been strengthened as a result of the reorganisation of the NHS?

In autumn 2013 the CCG commenced its pre-consultation. The chair of the CCG met with a number of my constituents in February 2014, when he heard clearly their desire to retain Katie Road and their objections to a plan being pushed by the CCG to relocate the walk-in centre to a site at the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Trust site, adjacent to the hospital’s A&E unit. In July 2014 I invited the chair of the CCG and a number of his staff to take part in a second meeting attended by more than 80 constituents—we were limited by the size of the room, or it would have been many more. At that meeting they heard clearly once again that there was total opposition to the closure of the walk-in centre and the plans to relocate to the hospital. That review or consultation eventually fizzled out, with the promise of a bigger and better consultation later in 2014.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The issue of such walk-in centres closing down is difficult for all of us in our constituencies. It is no good Conservative Members saying that we will have a seven-day a week GP service, because what they have done already with regard to the junior doctors dispute shows that they are not capable of doing that. That means that our constituents will continue to suffer. In particular, those at work cannot access services and are therefore put at greater risk through further misdiagnosis or non-diagnosis.

Steve McCabe: My hon. Friend will know very well that there is a problem with GP provision in his part of Birmingham as well as my own, so it is difficult to see how it could be stretched further.

As I said, we were promised a bigger and better consultation for later in 2014, but that was abandoned in light of the impending general election, the date of which had, obviously, been known since the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

No satisfactory explanation for the proposed change has ever been provided, but now, once again, the CCG wants to consult on the future of the walk-in service. This time it apparently wants to consult on a new model of service, the details of which are known only to itself but which has apparently not been clinically tested. It appears that, once again, it involves plans to relocate the walk-in centre to a site adjacent to the A&E unit.

As the Minister will know, sections 75 to 77 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 specifically state that commissioners are required to act in a transparent way when procuring services:

“Transparency is important in ensuring that commissioners are accountable for their decisions. As noted, commissioners also have a duty to involve the public in commissioning decisions.”

It is not clear to me where in that part of the Act there is support for a series of bungled and inadequate on-off reviews and a constant determination to impose one outcome irrespective of the arguments to the contrary. I would welcome the Minister’s view on that. I am deeply concerned at the continuing threats to the service, which plays such a vital part in the delivery of healthcare for my constituents. I cannot see how the loss of a provision such as Katie Road is consistent with the Government’s ambitions for a seven-day NHS—perhaps the Minister can advise me on that.

Ironically, I have recently discovered that the opening hours of the Katie Road centre are to be extended to help cope with winter pressures. Dr Lumley, who works with the neighbouring CCG, which also serves south Birmingham, is quoted in the press as saying, in response to that announcement, that ‘this is great news for patients in Birmingham and means they can access the Walk in Centre until late, seven days a week.”
Such a pity her views are not shared by her colleagues in CrossCity CCG, who assumed responsibility for Katie Road in the carve-up following the introduction of the Lansley reforms.

It seems to me that the CCG is clearly out of its depth in handling a public consultation, or certainly one that can command any public confidence. What advice and support, if any, do the Government offer to CCGs on conducting consultations with the public? I am curious to know how much public money—money that could obviously have been spent on patient care—the CCG has spent on its on-off reviews and consultations so far. Is there any limit to how much public money a CCG is entitled to spend on a review or consultation on a single issue? If so, how much is it? Who is ultimately responsible for making a decision on the future of urgent care provision in south Birmingham? Do the Government accept any responsibility for this unsatisfactory state of affairs, and is there anything the Minister can do to help me and my constituents secure the future of this popular and well used health resource in south Birmingham, which is clearly needed and highly valued?

At the very least, I urge the Minister to write to the chair of the CCG following this Adjournment debate, urging him to communicate properly with my constituents and their elected representatives, to stop repeatedly trying to impose plans that have already been rejected and to bring this whole sorry state of affairs to a satisfactory conclusion.

7.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for his clear outlining of the case for his constituents and for Katie Road walk-in centre, and I congratulate him on securing this debate. He touches on an interesting issue for the NHS as a whole, one with which clinicians have been grappling in the past few years: what is the nature of urgent and emergency care in a world where demography is changing rapidly, where demands on the service are changing and where there are incredibly different and disparate populations? He rightly points out that he represents a constituency that has a high student population, that has areas with high levels of deprivation and that has a wide mix of ethnic diversity. Other parts of the country have a significantly ageing profile and do not have the ethnic mix that he is able to enjoy in his part of Birmingham; they have a different socio-economic profile.

What is clear for commissioners and for clinicians is that the answer for urgent and emergency care in one area is different from that in another. I know that might be stating the blindingly obvious, but it was something that was not observed by the NHS before Professor Sir Bruce Keogh initiated his review of urgent and emergency care in 2013. The result of that was a holistic, sensible and coherent plan for how urgent and emergency care should be delivered across the country. The variation in care, from Northumbria down to Cornwall, is extensive at the moment; there are considerable differences. The hon. Gentleman has highlighted the fact that there are differences even within the city of Birmingham. At the very least, we have made progress in the past few years in having a vision of what urgent and emergency care should look like. The challenge is to try to implement that across the service, which is why, over the past two years, considerable work has been done by clinicians and commissioners to try to understand how the principles of the Keogh review can inform the reshaping of emergency and urgent care in their patches.

As the hon. Gentleman has identified with the issue of one walk-in centre—he can imagine how such local controversies become all the greater when they involve accident and emergency centres and trauma centres—these are matters that are very close to the hearts of constituents, who rely on those services. Those services are there in their moment of need, and they are, in a very real sense, the single greatest embodiment of the NHS and its values. We must treat urgent and emergency care with the utmost care.

The plans that are being worked up across the country are being done carefully with commissioners in co-ordination with NHS England and, ultimately, with Professor Sir Bruce Keogh. Let me give the hon. Gentleman an idea of why that has been so carefully done and the extent of care that has been taken: it was only in the autumn that the route map for the whole country was published. I hope he will therefore understand why his local CCGs have had to revise the timetables by which they have been looking at urgent and emergency care. As he pointed out, they began their own study of this in Birmingham before Professor Sir Bruce Keogh undertook his review. They have had to revise their thinking in the light of that, and I know that they are taking forward their current consultation on the basis of the route maps that have been designed by NHS England with commissioners around the country.

The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about process. I know why he is frustrated, and I completely understand his frustration. I also understand his irritation at the bureaucratese that can fly in his face as a representative of local people. I cannot specifically talk about the consultation of which he speaks because I do not have a detailed knowledge of it. All I can say is that in the NHS there are good and bad consultations. What we have tried to do over the past five years—and I am trying to do this in my current position—is to ensure that we bring the worst consultations up to the best, that we learn from where they have gone wrong and that they go better. I can of course commit to write to the chairman of his CCG, perhaps highlighting the work that has been done around producing very good consultations, reiterating the points that he has made in his speech, and asking for a clarification around each and every point that he has raised, so that he feels satisfied that he has raised his issues in the Chamber and that he can provide answers to his constituents. Clearly, he feels that, at the moment, there is much confusion and not too much clarity.

I spoke to senior commissioners in the CCG today in advance of this debate to ensure that I was aware of the facts of the situation. They assured me that there is a full intention to continue services at Katie Road. The centre’s value is understood and well known, which is precisely why there was a temporary extension of the hours till 10 pm to deal with the winter pressures that are felt across the service. The commissioners also made it clear that there has not been a predetermination about the location of a further urgent care centre. It will be in Selly Oak, and it will be considerably larger than
Katie Road so it will be able to accommodate more services and will be of greater use to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. The commissioners have not come to a decision yet about where it should be located. I know that they will want to engage fully with him and with the community in order to ensure that it goes to the right place.

Steve McCabe: When the Minister was given an assurance that Katie Road would continue, he was presumably told that the contract was due to come to an end. Was there any indication that there was an intention to have yet another roll-over contract, or whether there is a timescale attached to the consultation—yet another one?

Ben Gummer: No, I was not assured in that level of detail—I can ask for that information in my letter to the chairman of the CCG—but I think that the intentions were clear, and they seemed entirely honourable. They understood the purpose of the centre, and they clearly saw the disadvantage of those services discontinuing before a new urgent care centre opens. I think that they understand the hon. Gentleman's perfectly reasonable point that there needs to be some sort of continuity of service so that local people know where to go and can feel confident about local service provision.

On the important point about location and co-location, it will be different for different areas. The hon. Gentleman might have local pressures at University Hospitals Birmingham that do not pertain elsewhere in the country. It might be right—we are having exactly the same discussion in my constituency at the moment—to make use of an A&E brand and say, “Right, you have one simple place to go,” or it might be right to locate services on a different site. That will be different for different places. That is why it was decided in 2009, under the previous Labour Government, to give commissioners a greater role in local decisions on urgent and emergency care, because they are the ones who know their patches best, and what I write in Whitehall might not be right for local conditions in Selly Oak, or anywhere else for that matter.

I cannot therefore give the hon. Gentleman an answer on co-location because it will be different in different parts of the country, but what I can tell him is that my letter to the chairman of the CCG will include a particular reference to the fact that he and his constituents wish to be consulted and that there needs to be a clear rationale behind the location so that people feel that it is done not for the ease of NHS-land, but for the betterment of patient service.

The hon. Gentleman asked about consistency with seven-day services. I would like to reassure him that we are building seven-day services on the basis of the urgent and emergency care networks that were outlined by Professor Sir Bruce Keogh in his 2013 review and the consequent work. Contrary to the suggestion of his hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), the seven-day services programme is entirely clinically led. It draws on the work that the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges undertook in 2013 to develop 10 clinical standards. That is the basis of the work we are taking forward. The contract reform that we have undertaken, both for junior doctors and for consultants, is based in part on the recommendations of those 10 clinical standards, so it is routed entirely in the need to respond to the top clinicians' advice on how we achieve consistency of service across seven days of the week.

I would therefore expect the results of any consultation into urgent and emergency care in Birmingham to match precisely the overall work that we are doing to ensure consistency of standards across seven days of the week, good access for patients and a clear and transparent approach to urgent and emergency care, which in parts of the country, as the hon. Gentleman has identified, can at times be both patchy and confusing.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked whether there is a threat to walk-in centres. Under this Government we will see continued investment in urgent and emergency care. We will seek to find greater clarity around urgent and emergency care so that there is a clearer brand and more easily recognisable services for local people, so that we eliminate inconsistencies across the service and so that we fulfil the best clinical advice on how to achieve better services in urgent and emergency care by following the recommendations of Professor Sir Bruce Keogh and the work that has been done by local clinicians since. I do not believe therefore that there is a threat to urgent and emergency care services, and I believe they will improve over the next four years.

That is why I am happy to promise the hon. Gentleman that I will continue to answer questions on Katie Road. Should he have any further concerns, I would be delighted if he came to me so that we could talk about them. I will do what I can to allay those concerns and to make representations on his behalf to his clinical commissioning group so that he can get the answers he seeks.

Question put and agreed to.

7.40 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Divisions

ESTIMATES

That this House agrees with the Report of the Liaison Committee of 10 February:

(1) That a day not later than 18 March be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2015-16: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, insofar as it relates to the science budget; and Department of Health, insofar as it relates to end of life care.

(2) That a further day not later than 18 March be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2015-16: Foreign & Commonwealth Office, insofar as it relates to the Foreign Office, insofar as it relates to the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2015-16: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, insofar as it relates to the science budget; and Department of Health, insofar as it relates to end of life care. 

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 60.

Division No. 198]

AYES

Adams, Nigel  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Allan, Lucy  
Allen, Heidi  
Amess, Sir David  
Andrew, Stuart  
Ansell, Caroline  
Argar, Edward  
Atkins, Victoria  
Bacon, Mr Richard  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Barclay, Stephen  
Baron, Mr John  
Barwell, Gavin  
Bebb, Guto  
Bellingham, Sir Henry  
Beresford, Sir John  
Berry, Jake  
Berry, James  
Bingham, Andrew  
Blackman, Bob  
Blackwood, Nicola  
Blunt, Crispin  
Boles, Nick  
Bone, Mr Peter  
Borrow, Victoria  
Bottomley, Sir Peter  
Bradley, Karen  
Brady, Mr Graham  
Brazier, Mr Julian  
Bridgen, Andrew  
Brine, Steve  
Brookeshire, rh James  
Bruce, Fiona  
Buckland, Robert  
Burns, Conor  
Burns, rh Sir Simon  
Burrowes, Mr David  
Cairns, Alun  
Cameron, rh Mr David  
Carmichael, Neil  
Cartidge, James  
Caulfield, Maria  
Chalk, Alex  
Chishti, Rehman  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, rh Greg  
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth  
Cleverly, James  
Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
Collins, Damian  
Colville, Oliver  
Costa, Alberto  
Crabb, rh Stephen  
Davies, Byron  
Davies, Chris  
Davies, David T. C.  
Davies, Glyn  
Davies, Dr James  
Davies, Mims  
Davies, rh Mr David  
Dinenage, Caroline  
Djongjoly, Mr Jonathan  
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel  
Donelan, Michelle  
Darries, Nadine  
Double, Steve  
Dowden, Oliver  
Doyle-Price, Jackie  
Drax, Richard  
Drummond, Mrs Flick  
Duddridge, James  
Duncan, rh Sir Alan  
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain  
Dunne, Mr Philip  
Elliott, Tom  
Ellis, Michael  
Ellison, Jane  
Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
Elphicke, Charlie  
Eustice, George  
Evans, Graham  
Evans, rh Mr Nigel  
Evans, rh Mr David  
Fabricant, Michael  
Fallon, rh Michael  
Fernandes, Suella  
Flynn, Paul  
Foster, Kevin  
Fox, rh Dr Liam  
Francois, rh Mr Mark  
Frazier, Lucy  
Freeman, George  
Fuller, Richard  
Fysh, Marcus  
Gale, Sir Roger  
Garnier, rh Sir Edward  
Garnier, Mark  
Gauke, Mr David  
Ghani, Nusrat  
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl  
Glen, John  
Gove, rh Michael  
Graham, Richard  
Grant, Mrs Helen  
Grayling, chris  
Green, Chris  
Green, rh Dameian  
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  
Griffiths, Andrew  
Gummer, Ben  
Gyimah, Mr Sam  
Hafon, rh Robert  
Hall, Luke  
Hammond, rh Mr Philip  
Hammond, Stephen  
Hancock, rh Matthew  
Hands, rh Greg  
Harper, rh Mr Mark  
Harrington, Richard  
Harris, Rebecca  
Hart, Simon  
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan  
Heald, Sir Oliver  
Heaton-Harris, Chris  
Heaton-Jones, Peter  
Henderson, Gordon  
Heron, Lady  
Hinds, Damian  
Hoare, Simon  
Holleringbe, George  
Hollinrake, Kevin  
Hollobone, Mr Philip  
Holloway, Mr Adam  
Hopkins, Kris  
Howarth, Sir Gerald  
Howell, John  
Howlett, Ben  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy  
Jackson, Mr Stewart  
James, Margot  
Javid, rh Sajid  
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil  
Jenkin, Mr Bernard  
Jenkyns, Andrea  
Jenrick, Robert  
Johnson, Boris  
Johnson, Gareth  
Johnson, Joseph  
Jones, Mr Marcus  
Kaczynski, Daniel  
Kennedy, Seema  
Kinahan, Danny  
Kirby, Simon  
Knight, rh Sir Greg  
Knight, Julian  
Kiwarteng, Kwasi  
Latham, Pauline  
Leadsom, Andrea  
Lee, Dr Phillip  
Lefroy, Jeremy  
Leigh, Sir Edward  
Leslie, Charlotte  
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver  
Lewis, Brandon  
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian  
Liddington, rh Mr David  
Lillie, rh Mr Peter  
Lopresti, Jack  
Lord, Jonathan

Noughton, Tim  
Lumley, Karen  
Mackinlay, Craig  
Mackintosh, David  
Main, Mrs Anne  
Mak, Mr Alan  
Malthouse, Kit  
Mann, Scott  
Mathias, Dr Tania  
May, rh Mrs Theresa  
Maynard, Paul  
McCartney, Jason  
McCartney, Karl  
McDonnell, Dr Alasdair  
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick  
McPartland, Stephen  
Menzies, Mark  
Merriman, Huw  
Metcalfe, Stephen  
Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
Milling, Amanda  
Mills, Nigel  
Milton, rh Anne  
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
Mordaunt, Penny  
Morgan, rh Nicky  
Morris, Anne Marie  
Morris, David  
Morris, James  
Morton, Wendy  
Mowat, David  
Mundell, rh David  
Murphy, Mrs Cheryl  
Newton, Sarah  
Nuttall, Mr David  
Offord, Dr Matthew  
Opperman, Guy  
Osborne, rh Mr George  
Parish, Neil  
Patel, rh Priti  
Paterson, rh Mr Owen  
Pawsey, Mark  
Penning, rh Mike  
Penrose, John  
Percy, Andrew  
Perry, Claire  
Phillips, Stephen  
Philip, Chris  
Pickles, rh Sir Eric  
Pincher, Christopher  
Prentis, Victoria  
Prisk, rh Mark  
Pritchard, Mark  
Purssglove, Tom  
Quin, Jeremy  
Quince, Will  
Raab, rh Mr Dominic  
Redwood, rh John  
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
Roberson, Mr Laurence  
Robinson, Dawn  
Robinson, Mary  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Rudd, rh Amber  
Rutley, David  
Scully, Paul  
Shapps, rh Grant  
Sharma, Alok  
Shelbrooke, Alec  
Simpson, David  
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
The House divided: Ayes 299, Noes 226.

Division No. 197

AYES

Adams, Nigel  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Allan, Lucy  
Allen, Heidi  
Amess, Sir David  
Andrew, Stewart  
Ansell, Caroline  
Arag, Edward  
Atkins, Victoria  
Bacon, Mr Richard  
Baker, Mr Steve  
Baldwin, Harriett  
Barclay, Stephen  
Baron, Mr John  
Barwell, Gavin  
Bebb, Guto  
Bellingham, Sir Henry  
Beresford, Sir Paul  
Berry, Jake  
Berry, James  
Bingham, Andrew  
Blackman, Bob  
Blackwood, Nicola  
Blunt, Crispin  
Boles, Nick  
Bone, Mr Peter  
Borwick, Victoria  
Bottomley, Sir Peter  
Bradley, Karen  
Brady, Mr Graham  
Brahe, Tom  
Brazier, Mr Julian  
Bridge, Andrew  
Brine, Steve  
Brokenshire, rh James  
Bruce, Fiona  
Buckland, Robert  
Burns, Conor  
Burns, rh Sir Simon  
Burrowes, Mr David  
Cairns, Alun  
Cameron, rh Mr David  
Carmichael, Neil  
Cartidge, James  
Caufield, Maria  
Chalk, Alex  
Chishi, Rehman  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, rh Greg  
Clarke, Mr Kenneth  
Clegg, rh Mr Nick  
Cleverly, James  
Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
Collins, Damian  
Colville, Oliver  
Costa, Alberto  
Crabb, rh Stephen  
Davies, Byron  
Davies, Chris  
Davies, David T. C.  
Davies, Glyn  
Davies, Dr James  
Davies, Mims  
Davis, rh Mr David  
Dinenage, Caroline  
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan

NOES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina  
Allen, Mr Graham  
Arkless, Richard  
Bardell, Hannah  
Black, Mhairi  
Blackford, Ian  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Boswell, Philip  
Brake, rh Tom  
Brook, Deidre  
Brown, Alan  
Cameron, Dr Lisa  
Cherry, Joanna  
Clegg, rh Mr Nick  
Cowan, Ronnie  
Crawley, Angela  
Day, Martyn  
Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
Donaldson, Stuart Blair  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Fellows, Marion  
Fenner, Margaret  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gibson, Patricia  
Grady, Patrick  
Gray, Neil  
Hendry, Drew  
Kerevan, George  
Kerr, Calum  
Law, Chris

Truss, rh Elizabeth  
Tugendhat, Tom  
Turner, Mr Andrew  
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew  
Vara, Mr Shailesh  
Vickers, Martin  
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Wallace, Mr Ben  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Watkinson, Dame Angela  
Wharton, James  
Whately, Helen  
White, Chris  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, Mr Rob  
Wilson, Sammy  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, William  
Wright, Mr Iain  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim

Lucas, Caroline  
Mc Nally, John  
McCaig, Callum  
McDonald, Stuart  
McGarry, Natalie  
McLaughlin, Anne  
Monaghan, Carol  
Monaghan, Dr Paul  
Mulholland, Greg  
Mullin, Roger  
Newlands, Gavin  
Nicolson, John  
O'Hara, Brendan  
Oswald, Kirsten  
Owen, Albert  
Paterson, Steven  
Pugh, John  
Roberts, rh Angus  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Stephens, Chris  
Thewillis, Alison  
Thompson, Owen  
Thompson, Michelle  
Whiteford, Dr Elidith  
Williams, Hywel  
Williams, Mr Mark  
Wilson, Corri  
Wishart, Pete  
Zeichner, Daniel

Leahy, Michelle  
Donnies, Nadine  
Double, Steve  
Downen, Oliver  
Doyle-Price, Jackie  
Drax, Richard  
Drummond, Mrs Flick  
Duddridge, James  
Duncan, rh Sir Alan  
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain  
Dunne, Mr Philip  
Elliott, Tom  
Ellis, Michael  
Ellison, Jane  
Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
Elphicke, Charlie  
Eustice, George  
Evans, Graham  
Evans, Mr Nigel  
Evnett, rh Mr David  
Fabricant, Michael  
Fallon, rh Michael  
Fernandes, Suella  
Foster, Kevin  
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Francois, rh Mr Mark  
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Freeman, George  
Fuller, Richard  
Fysh, Marcus  
Gale, Sir Roger  
Garner, rh Sir Edward  
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Gauke, Mr David  
Ghani, Nusrat  
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl  
Glen, John  
Gove, rh Michael  
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Grant, Mrs Helen  
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Gyimah, Mr Sam  
Halfon, rh Robert  
Hall, Luke  
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Heron, Lady  
Hinds, Damian  
Hoare, Simon  
Hollingbery, George  
Hollinrake, Kevin

The draft Passenger and Goods Vehicles (Tachographs) (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 12 January, be approved.

Question accordingly agreed to.

ROAD TRAFFIC
**Deferred Divisions**

24 FEBRUARY 2016

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Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Sammy
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Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.
House of Commons

Thursday 25 February 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MRSPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Vulnerable Witnesses

1. Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): What recent steps the Crown Prosecution Service has taken to ensure that there is adequate support for vulnerable witnesses giving evidence in criminal proceedings.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): In September last year the Crown Prosecution Service published guidance for advocates on better communication with all witnesses. Advocates receive mandatory training for cases involving vulnerable witnesses, and special measures for those witnesses are regularly used at court, including pre-recorded evidence, intermediaries, screens or the use of a video link.

Robert Jenrick: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that, in my experience as a former solicitor, witnesses, particularly the most vulnerable witnesses, want to be kept better informed of the process of their case, to hear updates in a timely fashion, to be able to give evidence as quickly as possible without losing their right to be heard, and to be treated in the least intimidating way possible within the court process?

The Attorney General: Indeed. It is important that we ensure that witnesses who are engaged in criminal trials, which will be difficult experiences for them at the best of times, understand what is happening in the case around them. I hope that my hon. Friend will be as encouraged as I am by the trials that have been run in three different Crown courts for pre-recorded cross-examination. That will enable vulnerable and young witnesses in particular to get their part in the trial out of the way and any further delays in that trial will not affect them. That is a huge step forward.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I remind the Attorney General that the Conservative party manifesto promised a victims law. We are quite some time now from the first year of Parliament, so we have a little time left. When we do bring forward proposals I am sure he will be encouraged to see ways in which we can help victims understand better what is happening in the cases in which they are involved, and help them have a less difficult experience within the criminal justice system. Having held ministerial responsibility for the system, the right hon. Gentleman knows full well that we will never be able to get to a place where giving evidence and being involved in criminal trials is easy for victims and witnesses, but we can make it less hard and we will bring forward proposals to do so.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I welcome what the Attorney General has said about the new victims code. What discussions has he had with the CPS regarding implementation of that code by prosecutors?

The Attorney General: The Solicitor General and I have regular conversations with the CPS about how we make sure that what prosecutors do assists victims and witnesses. My hon. Friend will understand that it is a prosecutor’s responsibility to prosecute a case on behalf of the state, not solely on behalf of a victim, but it is none the less important that victims are spoken to regularly and sensitively by those who are involved in the prosecution.

Andrew Gwynne (Dent on and Reddish) (Lab): May I, through the Attorney General, thank the Government for deciding to reverse their decision to close Stockport courthouse, which has excellent facilities for victims and witnesses? Given that Her Majesty’s inspectorate has said that services to victims and witnesses require improvement, can the right hon. and learned Gentleman set out precisely what the Government will do to provide that?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman will know that the court estate is not part of my responsibilities, but I congratulate him on the success of his representations. In relation to victims and witnesses, there are a number of things that need to be done. Some will come from the Ministry of Justice; some, as I have indicated, come from encouraging prosecutors to do their job of interacting with victims and witnesses in a more effective way. We are making progress on that. Better communication, as I said, is important. Better training for prosecutors in dealing with cases, particularly where vulnerable witnesses or children are involved, is important and we are doing that too. Some of the measures that we are taking, which I referred to earlier, in respect of ways in which victims give evidence can also help in ensuring that the experience is distressing as little as possible.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Judges and legal advisers play a crucial role in assisting vulnerable witnesses in court. Is the Attorney General aware of the profound distress and demoralisation among legal advisers about the increased pressure that they are under because of the imposition of continued legal aid cuts and the effect on courts?

The Attorney General: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that legal aid is not part of my responsibilities, but I will say that in my experience—and, I am sure, in his—those who act in our courts on behalf of defendants and on behalf of the Crown do the very best they can to present the evidence clearly and give people the best possible experience of the trial process, and I have no doubt that they will continue to do so. He makes an important point that when it comes to the cross-examination
of young or vulnerable witnesses, both advocates and
the judiciary have a role in ensuring that it is conducted
in the right way. I hope and expect that they will
continue to play their part in doing so.

Constitutional Legislation

2. Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): What
discussions he has had with the Scottish Government
on the potential effect of a British Bill of Rights on
Scotland.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The Government
are considering the devolution implications of the Bill
of Rights carefully. That will of course include engaging
fully with the devolved Administrations in Scotland,
Wales and Northern Ireland.

Callum McCaig: It emerged during an evidence session
to the House of Lords Constitution Committee that the
UK Supreme Court may be given a new role as a UK
constitutional court. Given that the UK Supreme Court
is the final court of appeal for Scottish civil cases and
has a role in the devolution aspects of Scottish criminal
cases, will the Attorney General commit to consulting
with the Scottish Government before any such proposals
are included in a consultation?

The Attorney General: If the hon. Gentleman is referring
to the Lord Chancellor’s evidence to that Committee,
which I have read, he is not quite right; the Lord
Chancellor was talking about the prospects for considering
how the Supreme Court might fulfil a different role, and
he was referring to the German example of how that is
done. The hon. Gentleman will also know that no
proposals have yet been brought forward; he will see
them when they are. As I, the Lord Chancellor and
others have said, we will ensure that there is proper
consultation on any proposals.

Gavin Newlands: As the Attorney General will be
aware, both the Joint Committee on Human Rights and
the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human
Rights have independently commented on the undesirability
of any overlap between the proposed consultation on
the Bill of Rights and pre-election periods, including
for the Scottish Parliament elections in May. What
discussions has he had with the Justice Secretary regarding
publication of the consultation?

The Attorney General: Again, the hon. Gentleman
will have to wait to see the proposals when they are
brought forward. On timing, he will know that the
Cabinet Office has very clear guidelines on respect for
purdah periods before elections, and I know that my
right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor is keen that all
due regard is paid to them.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: The Attorney General might not
be aware that the Scottish Government’s Cabinet Secretary
for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners’ Rights,
Alex Neil MSP, recently wrote to the Secretary of State
for Justice to express concern that he has not sought to
discuss the proposal to repeal the Human Rights Act
with the Scottish Government. Given the wide implications
of any repeal of the Act on Scotland, does the Attorney
General agree that the Secretary of State for Justice
must formally engage with the Scottish Government to
discuss their concerns?

The Attorney General: The hon. Lady is right; I have
not seen that letter. But I do know that Mr Neil, and
indeed other Scottish Government Ministers, have had
contact with UK Government Ministers to discuss these
matters. I can reassure her that when the proposals are
brought forward, there will be proper consultation with
the devolved Administrations.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): The
impending imposition of the British Bill of Rights
could have the effect of curtailing the jurisdiction of the
Court of Justice in Luxembourg as well as the Court in
Strasbourg. Is it not the case that that will require
further renegotiation with our EU partners and, therefore,
should it not have formed a crucial part of the recent
so-called renegotiation?

The Attorney General: I am not sure that there is
much appetite anywhere in Europe for re-opening those
negotiations. The hon. Gentleman might find that there
are proposals coming from this Government to make
our relationship with the charter of fundamental rights
clearer, based on protocol 30 of the treaties, which, as
he will be aware, was negotiated by a previous Government.
The protocol makes it clear that the charter does not
extend rights in this country. We will bring forward
further proposals on clarifying that, and again he will
have a good opportunity to discuss them when he sees
them.

Investigatory Powers

3. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What
discussions he has had with his Cabinet colleagues
on the compatibility of Government proposals on
investigatory powers with EU law.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): I regularly
meet ministerial colleagues to discuss important issues
of common interest, including on EU law matters. I am
unable to talk about any legal content of those discussions,
because whether or not the Law Officers have given
advice, by convention, is not disclosed outside Government.

Alan Brown: Recent judgments from the European
Court of Human Rights, such as in Zakharov v. Russia,
strongly suggest that the powers in the United Kingdom’s
draft Investigatory Powers Bill could violate the European
convention on human rights. What discussions has he
had with his colleagues in the Home Office to ensure
that powers provided for in the Bill are compatible with
the convention?

The Solicitor General: I can assure the hon. Gentleman
that in the most recent case in the Court of Appeal, in
November last year, the provisional view was that the
Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014 was
Mr Speaker: Order. Question 9 has just been withdrawn, although the Attorney General was not to know that, and I thank him for announcing the grouping.

Nic Dakin: Will the Attorney General list which of the convention rights currently enshrined in the Human Rights Act he plans to repeal?

The Attorney General: I have no plans to repeal any of them. As the hon. Gentleman may have heard me say in this place before, I do not think any of us has any serious argument with the content of the European convention on human rights, which is an admirable document. The difficulty we have is with the interpretation of that document by the European Court of Human Rights. This is not a matter of repealing rights; it is a matter of bringing some common sense back into the ambit of human rights law, and the Government are committed to doing that.

Cat Smith: Does the Minister think it causes any legal or constitutional problem that the Lord Chancellor will no longer be able to ask his Department’s officials for advice on the powers of the European Court of Justice?

The Attorney General: I do not think that is the position at all. The Lord Chancellor will continue to do the excellent job he is doing of running the justice system. He will be able to ask for advice from his equally excellent Government lawyers.

Michael Ellis: Part of the UK’s human rights obligations is to ensure that minority communities are not subjected to harassment and distress. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that allegations of rabid anti-Semitic behaviour from the Oxford University Labour club are a disgrace to Oxford and no doubt an embarrassment to the Labour party, and that they should be dealt with robustly by the University, if not by other authorities?

Cat Smith: Does the Minister think it causes any legal or constitutional problem that the Lord Chancellor will no longer be able to ask his Department’s officials for advice on the powers of the European Court of Justice?

The Attorney General: I do not think that is the position at all. The Lord Chancellor will continue to do the excellent job he is doing of running the justice system. He will be able to ask for advice from his equally excellent Government lawyers.

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend: these are very troubling allegations, and I hope they are dealt with swiftly and effectively. However, he makes the important point that all of us, on both sides of the House, believe in the protection of human rights and in rules and laws that allow that protection to happen. What we are not in favour of is the perversion of human rights law by the introduction of silly cases that should not be before the courts at all. That obscures the important work my hon. Friend is referring to.

Mr Christopher Chope: Under the Lisbon treaty, the European Union has a treaty obligation to join the European convention on human rights. However, the European Court of Justice has said that that would be incompatible with EU law. Does that not demonstrate that the European Court of Justice is, indeed, supreme?

The Attorney General: I am sure you, Mr Speaker, were as worried as I was that this session was going to pass without mention of the European Union, so I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting that matter right. As he knows, the decision on whether the European Union accedes to the convention on human rights is for
the European Union, and it is therefore not unnatural that the Court of Justice of the European Union should express its opinion. All member states, and indeed the institutions of the European Union, now need to consider carefully what action they take next, and I am sure that institutions of the European Union, now need to consider expressing its opinion. All member states, and indeed the European Union, and it is therefore not unnatural that the Court of Justice of the European Union should express its opinion. All member states, and indeed the institutions of the European Union, now need to consider carefully what action they take next, and I am sure that what they will do.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I am sure the Attorney General will recall that the Attorney General played an important role during the Iraq war, and that it continued right up until the various inquiries, including the Chilcot inquiry. I think he ought to declare now, in order to get rid of any doubts, whose side he is on—the Justice Minister or the Prime Minister. It is a fairly easy question: which side is it?

The Attorney General: I am on the Government’s side: I think I made my position quite clear yesterday. In relation to the role of the Attorney General in inquiries, the hon. Gentleman is of course right that the Attorney General, and the Law Officers more broadly, have an important part to play in ensuring that the Government actions stay within the law, domestic and international, and previous and current Law Officers take that responsibility very seriously.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Yesterday, Amnesty International published its annual report, which rightly criticises the Government’s plan to scrap Labour’s excellent Human Rights Act. Amnesty’s UK director, Kate Allen, commented that the behaviour of the UK towards China, Saudi Arabia and Egypt shows that the Government have lost their passion to promote human rights. Does not the Government kow-towing to countries like China and Saudi Arabia, without challenging their dodgy human rights records, and the Prime Minister’s phoney plan to water down the Human Rights Act, send the wrong message to dictators and rogue states?

The Attorney General: No. The position is this: Government Members, I am sure in common with the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, will continue passionately to advocate the case for the protection of human rights both in this country and abroad. He is quite wrong to say that this Government, in common with their predecessors, do not challenge other states that have a doubtful human rights record—we continue to do that.

In relation to the Amnesty International report, I have a huge amount of respect for what Amnesty International does, but in this report it has, in my view, overstated its case just a little. It is not the case, as I have said before and as the hon. Gentleman knows, that human rights and the Human Rights Act are the same thing. It is possible to protect human rights without the Human Rights Act—in fact better to do so—and that is what this Government intend to do.

Mr Speaker: Can we please speed up? I want to get to the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), who is the last questioner, and progress is frankly too slow.

Sexual Offences: Conviction Rates

5. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps the Government have taken to improve the conviction rate for rape and serious sexual offences.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The CPS has undertaken a considerable amount of work to place priority on the improvement of rape prosecutions.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Solicitor General for his admirably brief reply. He will know that despite claims of the highest number of convictions ever, convictions for rape, domestic abuse and other sexual offences have fallen. I work closely with Sheffield Rape Crisis, which tells me that there is a real postcode lottery in support for victims, and if victims are not supported they are less likely to come forward. What discussions has the Solicitor General had with the Home Secretary to ensure adequate funding for sexual violence advisers?

The Solicitor General: With regard to the hon. Gentleman’s specific question, I work regularly with colleagues in the Home Office to look at a wide range of measures that need to be put in place to give support to victims of sexual offences. I remind him that in terms of absolute volumes, conviction rates continue to rise and are the highest ever. I assure him that the CPS has now engaged 102 specialist prosecutors in its RASO—rape and sexual offences—units to place proper priority on the swift and effective prosecution of these serious cases.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): In our enthusiasm to get convictions where they are deserved, can the Solicitor General make sure in his discussions with the Home Office that other parts of the system, particularly the police, do not lose their commitment to justice, and that, while they must owe a proper duty to the complainant, they should not simply ignore potential exculpatory evidence in their investigations?

The Solicitor General: I reiterate that the police should follow the evidence wherever it leads. There should be no presumptions of truth or otherwise and they should objectively and fairly investigate cases before presenting them to the Crown Prosecution Service.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Is the Solicitor General aware that Scotland’s conviction rate for rape and sexual offences has increased significantly over the past few years as a result of setting up a centralised national sexual crimes unit in Edinburgh, in which the specialist prosecutors oversee the prosecution of all sexual crime across Scotland? I am sure that Scotland’s Law Officers would be very happy if England’s Law Officers wanted to visit and learn more about it.

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for raising that matter. The scale involved in England and Wales is slightly bigger, so they have taken the regional unit approach, but I entirely agree with her about the need to standardise practice. The Attorney General and I are always very conscious of that in our conversations with the Director of Public Prosecutions and the chief executive of the Crown Prosecution Service, and work is being done to improve that standardisation.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): In the latest thematic review of rape and serious sexual offence units, the CPS inspector found that the care given to victims of rape and sexual assault fell well short of what is expected". 

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Is the Solicitor General concerned by Kevin McGinty’s findings that in some areas the CPS has stopped giving early investigative advice to the police because resources are overstretched?

**The Solicitor General:** I remind the hon. Lady that that report related to a particular period from a year to 18 months ago, and since then the CPS has taken huge strides both in increasing the number of prosecutors and in improving the methods by which cases are assessed and managed.

**Legal Framework: Social Media**

6. **Rebecca Harris** (Castle Point) (Con): How many times the Law Officers referred a criminal sentence to the Court of Appeal on the grounds that it was unduly lenient in the last year.

**The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright):** In the calendar year to 31 December 2015, the Law Officers considered 467 sentences and referred 150 offenders to the Court of Appeal.

**Rebecca Harris:** Can the Attorney General confirm that he is fulfilling our manifesto commitment to review the unduly lenient sentences scheme, and will he comment specifically on whether that review will take into account family courts, where it is currently at the discretion of the presiding judge whether to refer up sentences of serious cases of sexual crimes and rape?

**The Attorney General:** The answer to the first part of my hon. Friend’s question is yes, we will fulfil that commitment and, as she knows, we are looking carefully at how best to do so. I will also consider what she has said in relation to matters considered by the youth courts. There are difficulties with including all youth court cases, but we will consider carefully what she has said and see whether there is a way of accommodating it.

**Criminal Sentencing: Leniency**

11. **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps he plans to take to improve the level of public understanding of the legal framework applicable to social media.

**The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland):** There is clearly some awareness of the legal framework applicable to social media, but I publish warnings online reminding people of their responsibilities wherever appropriate. My office also sends tweets warning social media users of the risk of being in contempt, where a particular problem has been identified. I assure my hon. Friend that I am always looking at ways of raising awareness in this area.

**Jack Lopresti:** Can my hon. and learned Friend explain what steps are being taken to prevent media coverage of ongoing cases?

**The Solicitor General:** The media quite properly play a role in reporting cases, but any lack of responsibility allows my office and, indeed, criminal law to intervene, particularly in respect of the Contempt of Court Act 1981. Detailed guidelines on the prosecution of such cases are available on the CPS website.

**WOMEN AND EQUALITIES**

**Race Inequality**

1. **Steven Paterson** (Stirling) (SNP): What steps the Government are taking to tackle race inequality.

2. **Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What steps the Government are taking to tackle race inequality.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):** The Prime Minister has set out challenging Government targets to increase black, Asian and minority ethnic opportunities by 2020, including take-up of apprenticeships, employment and recruitment to the police and armed services.

**Steven Paterson:** The Scottish Government have launched a programme entitled, “New Scots: Integrating Refugees in Scottish Communities”, in order to ensure that refugees have every opportunity and support to rebuild their lives in Scotland. What similar initiatives are the UK Government taking to support refugees and fight racism?

**Mr Jones:** The Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), who works across the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Home Office, is working extremely hard to support refugees in a way similar to the programme that the hon. Gentleman mentions.

**Roger Mullin:** Research suggests that people with ethnic-sounding names have to make twice as many job applications as do white Britons to get job interviews. Will the Minister therefore discuss with the Business Secretary and others how to strengthen guidance to companies on their recruitment practices?

**Mr Jones:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made a significant commitment in that area. Many of the country’s top employers, including the civil service, are committing to name blind recruitment processes, and UCAS will be making university applications name blind from 2017.

**Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Government on introducing name blind recruitment in the civil service, the NHS, and other large graduate employers. Will he join me in encouraging other large companies across the UK to follow suit?

**Mr Jones:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should certainly encourage companies across the country—not just FTSE 100 companies, which seem to be making significant efforts, but companies large and small—to look at diversity and how they can use it to improve their business.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): People from black and minority ethnic backgrounds make up 26% of apprenticeship applications but only 9.6% of the apprenticeships that are taken up. What is the Minister doing to improve those disappointing statistics?
Mr Jones: Apprenticeships are an extremely important part of the Government’s agenda. We have a target of 3 million apprenticeship starts during this Parliament. Within that, the Prime Minister has clearly set out the Government’s commitment to ensure that 20% of those apprenticeship starts are for BME young people, which I think is a great step forward.


 Universities: BME Students

3. Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of BME young people receiving a university education.

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): The Prime Minister, as we have just heard in respect of apprenticeships, has set a goal of increasing by 20% the number of BME students in higher education. In our new guidelines to the director of fair access, which we published on 11 February, we ask him to maximise the contribution of access agreements towards that ambition. The share of BME enrolments at the United Kingdom’s institutions has already risen by just over 20% to 23% between 2009 and 2015. Expenditure to widen access through agreements is expected to reach £746 million in 2016-17, up from £444 million in 2011.

Matthew Pennycook: Many gifted BME young people in my constituency of Basingstoke face a gender pay gap. I have two children, aged 16 and 18, and I want to make sure they have every opportunity. I do not want them to be held back by the gender pay gap. Will the Minister join me in seeking to address this issue?

Anna Soubry: The hon. Lady makes a very good point, if I may say so. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities, who makes the point that the London Academy of Excellence is a very good example. I must say that my nearest university, the University of Nottingham is—like Nottingham Trent University and many other universities—making a really positive effort to get into all our schools to make sure that all our pupils have every opportunity and that they, if I may put it this way, aim high.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The Government talk the talk of encouraging more black and minority ethnic students into university; yet, according to the Government’s own impact assessment, their recent decision to scrap maintenance grants will disproportionately affect those very same students. Does the Minister believe that this disproportionate impact is acceptable?

Anna Soubry: I am not familiar with the impact assessment, but I have to say that I am quite surprised by it. I reiterate the point: it is absolutely imperative that we make it very clear that everybody should aim high. That is what we want to do and that is what we are seeking to do.

 Gender Economic Inequality

4. Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to tackle gender economic inequality.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): The employment for women is at a record high, and the gender pay gap is at a record low. The Government are committed to enabling women and men to fulfil their economic potential.

Susan Elan Jones: That all sounds very nice, but with women being over-represented in sectors in which low pay is prominent and persistent, what is the Government’s strategy for tackling extended occupational segregation?

Harriett Baldwin: I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome the fact that 65% of the people who will benefit from the new national living wage in a couple of months will be women. This Government are taking that very important step to raise pay for the lowest-paid in our country.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I do not doubt my hon. Friend’s commitment to reducing the gender pay gap further, and I commend the Prime Minister for his position, but the reality is that women in my constituency of Basingstoke face a gender pay
gap of 30%. Should this not be on the agenda of every single company throughout the country, as well as on that of our local enterprise partnerships?

Harriett Baldwin: As my right hon. Friend will be aware, given her interest in this matter, not only are we taking steps to publish this information for companies with more than 250 people on the payroll, but for financial services—the sector I, as Economic Secretary, engage with most—which has the highest pay and the biggest pay gap, we have appointed Jayne-Anne Gadhia to review pay in the sector and see what further steps we can take. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said last July:

“Transparency, skills, representation, affordable childcare—these things can end the gender pay gap in a generation.”

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—campaigners are not going away, so will the Minister raise the issue of better transitional state pension arrangements with her Department for Work and Pensions counterpart? These women deserve fair play.

Harriett Baldwin: As a woman whose state pension age has gone up by six years during her working lifetime, I welcome the changes that will equalise the state pension age for men and women. That will end the discrimination of women in their late 50s, which has prevented far too many of them from reaching higher-paid roles in our society.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): What are the Government doing to reduce the economic inequality caused by gender differences in life expectancy?

Harriett Baldwin: We are putting more money into the NHS to ensure that everyone benefits from the good healthcare that has resulted in one of the remarkable features of our age—the fact that people of both genders are living much longer, which we should welcome.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Women's under-participation in the labour market costs the UK economy £600 billion in lost productivity, according to the Government's own analysis. Will the Minister guarantee that the forthcoming Budget will reverse the universal credit cuts that reduce work incentives and guarantee a childcare place to every working mum who needs one, and will she ask her colleague the Chancellor finally to clarify that of our local enterprise partnerships?

Harriett Baldwin: I am afraid that the hon. Lady, who is my twin, is completely wrong on this. The facts are that we are extending the free childcare offer to many people and bringing in tax-free childcare for many, many people. I share her aspiration to unleash the economic potential of women in our economy. The OECD has said that if the participation rates of men and women were equalised, the economy would be 10% larger. We are therefore taking a range of steps to encourage that to happen.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I welcome the draft gender pay gap reporting regulations that the Government published last week. Although I understand why the Government would not want to bring in enforcement procedures for non-compliance, will the Minister assure the House that the matter will be kept under constant review? Does she agree that it would be counter-productive for companies not to comply with the new regulations, as it would deter the most talented women from applying for their jobs?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend makes a very good point and I welcome his support for the initiative. It is a voluntary scheme. We are trying to change the culture, and transparency is part of that. It will allow women to make a choice. If they are thinking of working for a company, they will be able to ask, “Am I able to see how this company treats men and women?” And at a time of record employment for women in this country, women have more choices.

Domestic Violence Services: Funding

5. Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to secure long-term funding for domestic violence services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): The Government have already announced £40 million of funding for domestic abuse services between 2016 and 2020, as well as a £2 million grant to Women’s Aid and SafeLives to support early intervention. We will shortly publish a refreshed cross-governmental violence against women and girls strategy, which will set out how we will do more still to secure long-term funding for domestic violence services and support for all victims.

Keir Starmer: I return to the question of long-term funding for domestic violence services, which is so important, having raised it in January, when the Minister said she was holding discussions with service providers. How are those discussions progressing, and when will we see an outcome? Can we know at some stage, if not now, who is involved in those discussions?

Karen Bradley: I should make it clear that central Government funding for domestic abuse services has not been cut. I want to make that clear so that there is no confusion. The issue is about locally commissioned services. The hon. and learned Gentleman is right that I have been having discussions with local commissioners and service providers, and I will issue the refreshed VAWG strategy shortly.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Prime Minister said in January 2014 that he would ratify the Istanbul convention as soon as the UK banned forced marriages. The relevant legislation came into force in June 2014. Will the Minister explain what is now delaying the process?

Karen Bradley: There is an issue with article 44 of the Istanbul convention, which is about extraterritoriality. It is an issue regarding the devolved Administrations, of which there is more than one, as the hon. Lady will be aware. When we have clarified that point and passed the relevant primary legislation, we will ratify the Istanbul convention.
Welfare Reform: Gender Equality

6. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the effect on gender equality of the Government’s welfare reforms. [903741]

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): The Government set out their assessment of the impacts of the policies in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill on 20 July. Every Government policy change is carefully considered, in line with the legal obligations.

Chris Law: The Institute for Fiscal Studies has found that working lone parents with assets or unearned income are more likely to lose out under universal credit. With single parents overwhelmingly being female, it appears to me that the Government’s austerity programme is once again targeting women. What representations has the Minister made to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the impact of universal credit on women’s equality?

Priti Patel: I come back to my opening comment: we fully assessed the impact of the Bill’s equality measures, and we are meeting our wider obligations. As the hon. Gentleman will recognise, universal credit supports people in employment, and that applies equally to women. That is alongside all the additional measures that we are now implementing, such as the national living wage, increased childcare and tax-free childcare.

18. [903754] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that women’s aid groups have expressed serious concerns that changes to housing benefit could force the closure of many refuges. Will she challenge her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to exempt refuges from those changes, to protect vulnerable women and children who are fleeing domestic violence?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady will know that there are measures in the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, and they are in conjunction with the many discussions that we have with stakeholders, and we take on board all considerations. That is exactly what the Department will do in its dialogue with third-party organisations.

Retirement Age

7. Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): What recent meetings she has had with women who have been affected by changes to the retirement age; and if she will make a statement. [903742]

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): We all know that women are affected by changes to the retirement age, and Ministers and their officials have met and corresponded with hundreds of women about pensions reform. The changes have been subject to many recent parliamentary debates, and the Government’s position has been made clear.

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed the Government’s position has been made clear, and they are cloth-eared in listening to women who are affected by these pension changes. If the Minister had been present yesterday in the debate on providing transitional protection for women affected by the pensions changes, she would have heard Conservative Members—indeed, Members from every party in the House—cite individual women who have been degraded and impoverished by these changes. When will the Government begin to listen to them?

Priti Patel: I did listen to that debate, while I was also in another debate in Westminster Hall. Let us be clear: the Government have listened to extensive concerns that have been raised in the House, and concessions worth more than £1 billion were introduced to lessen the impact of the changes for those worst affected. The previous Government introduced future changes to the state pension age for women and men, following extensive debates in both Houses of Parliament. Importantly, the Government have made difficult but necessary decisions when it comes to speeding up the timetable for the equalisation of the pension age.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Women born in 1953 and 1954 are particularly badly affected by these changes. Many of them went into work at the age of 15, and will have to work more than 50 years before they can access their pension. Will the Government have another look at this? There are things that can be done if the political will is there.

Priti Patel: The Government have listened extensively to the concerns raised, and they have also worked with pensions organisations. To reiterate, the Government have made concessions of £1 billion, which have been introduced to lessen the impact of the changes on those affected.

Apprenticeships

8. Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve the pay for and quality of apprenticeships for women. [903743]

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): The apprentice national minimum wage applies equally to all apprentices, and from October last year that rate was increased by 21% to £3.30 per hour. We continue to focus on improving the quality of all apprenticeships, and we are putting that into statute. We all go into schools, and one great thing we can do is not only to act as role models, especially if we are female, but to sing out about things such as the apprenticeship scheme, and make clear that it is not confined to boys.

Naz Shah: I thank the Minister for her response, but the reality is very different to what is on paper. Results from ComRes commissioned by the Young Women’s Trust in September found that female apprentices earn £4.82 per hour, compared with £5.85 for men. Another survey stated that there is an £8,400 difference in those areas of work where women figure highly, such as social care, childcare and hairdressing, in comparison with men, so actually, it is not correct.

Anna Soubry: I am not quite sure what is not correct, but, in any event, I know what the minimum wage is and it is for all apprentices. If there is evidence that women doing apprenticeships are being in some way discriminated against in their pay, we want to know
about it, and we look forward to the hon. Lady coming forward, meeting the Minister for Women and Equalities, and between us we will sort it out.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): Will the Minister assure me that older women are getting a fair deal when it comes to apprenticeships, and especially that they are able to return to work after caring responsibilities? Will she look carefully at the engineering and construction sectors to ensure that they are truly open to all?

**Anna Soubry:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point. When it comes to those sectors, the Minister for Women and Equalities and I—in fact, all of us—are extremely keen to make sure that we use every opportunity and anything available to us to make the case that younger women in particular must go into these excellent work streams. We know we need to do more. We all have a part to play and that, of course, includes Government.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Given that the apprenticeship gender pay gap for women stands at about £2,000 a year, does the Minister share my concerns that this is where the gender pay gap begins? Will she explain why the Government’s new institute for apprenticeships does not include provision or targets for women? What message does she think that sends to women seeking apprenticeships?

**Anna Soubry:** The institute, with which I am familiar, will comprise all the sorts of people it should have on it—primarily employers, but it will look to work with providers—to make absolutely sure not only that the quality of apprenticeships is good, but that we get everybody and anybody applying for apprenticeships. Whatever someone’s background might be—sex, colour of skin or ethnicity—absolutely does not matter at all. In certain areas, I do not have a problem at all in making a positive case to make sure that more women or more people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds go into apprenticeships, especially the high-quality ones. There should be no barrier.

**Older Women: Caring Support**

9. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support older women with caring responsibilities; and if she will make a statement.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage):** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Unpaid carers are the unsung heroes of our economy. The value of informal care is about £62 billion a year. For many carers it is literally a labour of love, which is why we have extended the right to request flexible working. A pilot project is considering the best way to support carers, through investment in technology and professional support, to stay in employment.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): A constituent visited my surgery last week to seek help. She had planned to retire and care for her elderly mother, but she now finds, unexpectedly, that her retirement date will be significantly later than planned. Does the Minister understand the wide implications of the issue raised by the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign and the real difficulties that problems with notification of pension date changes are causing for 1950s-born women with caring responsibilities?

**Caroline Dinenage:** The hon. Lady makes a valid point. I understand the concerns, but she must remember that the new state pension will give 650,000 women an average increase of £416 a year on their pension and, in addition, support those who take time out of employment, for example for caring roles, by crediting this very important work.

10. **David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support women in setting up their own businesses.

**Caroline Dinenage:** Given that the Government are taking to support older women with caring responsibilities; and if she will make a statement.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage):** Since 2009, women have accounted for more than 50% of that increase. Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming Julie Deane’s new review into self-employment, and will she work with colleagues to take forward recommendations that will help more women to set up businesses successfully and to thrive?

**Caroline Dinenage:** Julie Deane is an incredibly inspiring example of the great female entrepreneurs we have here in the UK, and about a million of our small and medium-sized enterprises are indeed led by women, contributing an incredible £85 billion to the British economy. Julie has made some wide-ranging recommendations as part of her review into self-employment. I know that my hon. Friend has been involved in those recommendations, and they will be considered very carefully by the Government.

**Mr Speaker:** I ask the Minister to face the House. I understand that her questioner is behind her, but she should face the House.
Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): More generally for women who choose a career in business, I understand that Ministers in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have recently appointed Sir Philip Hampton to lead a review into increasing the number of women in UK boardrooms. I just wondered why the Minister thought that appointing that man was the right thing to do for this particular job.

Caroline Dinenage: I think we have to get away from the supposition that this is just a women’s problem. The fact that women are not as fully engaged as they should be on boards or indeed all the way through the business pipeline is a problem for everybody, and all businesses need to address this issue. That is why we need excellent people to lead this investigation, ensuring that it is all done as properly and fully as possible.

Homophobic Bullying

11. Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): What steps the Government are taking to reduce homophobic bullying of young people. [903746]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): Whether online or offline, all forms of bullying, including homophobic bullying, are completely unacceptable. That is why we are investing £2 million to support schools to address homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying more effectively. In fact, my Department is funding Stonewall’s Train the Trainers project in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, at the Great Clacton Church of England School, to build skills and confidence to address this form of bullying.

Mr Carswell: On which note, does the right hon. Lady agree that Stonewall’s Education Champions programme offers an excellent model for local authorities, academies and free schools to follow?

Nicky Morgan: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman saw sight of my answer, because I think we can firmly agree on that. I mentioned the £2 million project that we are funding. Stonewall is very much one of the bodies delivering on this, as are the Anne Frank Trust, Barnardo’s, Diversity Role Models, EACH—Educational Action Challenging Homophobia—Educate and Celebrate, the National Children's Bureau and Show Racism the Red Card. They are all doing an excellent job.

Gender Pay Gap

13. Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): What steps she is taking to reduce the gender pay gap. [903749]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities and Family Justice (Caroline Dinenage): We are committed to closing the gender pay gap within a generation. This is important not only for women, but for business, prosperity and the health of the UK economy. That is why from next April we are requiring large employers to publish their gender pay gap, and why we have been working very closely with business to help deliver this.

Callum McCaig: I thank the Minister for that answer and welcome the steps that are being made, but will she join me in commending the Scottish Government for laying regulations in Holyrood to extend the requirement on public authorities with more than 20 employees to publish information on their gender pay gap and equal pay statements?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes, we are always keen to take on board any information we can gather from anywhere that tackles the gender pay gap. We are consulting on the issue and we will shortly announce what we intend to do in respect of the public sector.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): As the father of a growing number of daughters, it is important to me that women can enjoy exactly the same level of career advancement as men, which they clearly do not. Many experts and leading female CEOs of international companies believe that the lead indicator is not the gender pay gap, but the level of career advancement for women. Will the Government consider looking in future into whether major companies could report the percentage of men and women at every stage within their organisation to help change the culture?

Caroline Dinenage: This legislation will require businesses to show how many people are employed at the different sectors of their organisations. However, my hon. Friend is right that this starts right from the beginning when girls are given careers advice about which businesses and sectors they should aim to get into. We need to get away from the idea that there are “girls’ jobs” and “boys’ jobs.” There are just “jobs.”

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I have recently put a series of parliamentary questions to every Government Department on the gender pay gap, and every Government Department that has answered to date has shown that there is a gender pay gap. What is the Minister going to do about the situation on her own watch?

Caroline Dinenage: Public sector employers will also be required to publish their gender pay gap statistics. It is a subject that we take very seriously. Nobody will be left unaffected by the legislation.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I wonder whether this legislation will be broad enough to help a constituent of mine who recently separated from her boyfriend. She now has a “To Let” sign outside her house at 102 Church Drive, Shirebrook because she works for Mike Ashley at Sports Direct on a zero-hours contract. I think that is disgraceful, and I would like to see legislation that ensures that employers who operate zero-hours contracts cannot put women such as my constituent in jeopardy so that they lose the roof over their heads.

Caroline Dinenage: Unlike the last Labour Government, we have taken steps to address the issue of zero-hours contracts, and those who apply them will be included in the legislation.

STEM Subjects: A-level

14. Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage more girls to take science, technology, engineering and mathematics at A-level. [903750]
The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): The number of science and maths A-level entries among girls has increased by 12,000 in the last five years, but the Government are determined to encourage even more girls to study those subjects to help them to secure rewarding jobs in the future. I recently announced that, by 2020, we want to see a 20% increase in the number of girls applying to study science and maths. To achieve that, we will build on an extensive range of Government-funded support for schools.

Andrea Jenkyns: There are some fantastic STEM schools in my constituency, including Outwood Grange Academy, where I attended a brilliant STEM skills workshop a couple of weeks ago, and Woodkirk Academy, which I visited with the Minister for Women and Equalities last year. Will she join me in praising those schools, which are helping more pupils to consider STEM careers by finding imaginative ways to show them the possibilities that those subjects hold? Pupils have even participated in a LEGO minecraft workshop at Woodkirk.

Nicky Morgan: I welcome the opportunity to join my hon. Friend in praising the work of Outwood Grange and Woodkirk Academies for their excellent work in this regard. During my visits I was impressed to see at first hand how the academies engage pupils in STEM subjects, demonstrating the application of science and maths and promoting STEM careers.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I am sure the whole House agrees that STEM subjects provide exciting, rewarding, fantastic career opportunities for women and girls, but studies show that without some personal experience of STEM careers, girls are unlikely to consider them fully. Why have the Government abolished face-to-face careers advice and made work experience something that girls have to organise for themselves? Will the Secretary of State bring back mandatory work experience?

Nicky Morgan: Actually, we are going to go much further. We have introduced, and are funding, the Careers & Enterprise Company. We shall be investing more than £70 million in careers work during the current Parliament to enable young men and women to be inspired by people who visit schools, by work experience opportunities, by finding out more, and by the Your Daughter’s Future programme. We discussed the gender pay gap earlier. I think it worth noting that those working in careers in science or technology are paid, on average, 19% more than those in other professions, and I think we can all agree that we want more girls to go into such careers.

Affordable Childcare

15. Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help parents find affordable childcare.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Nicky Morgan): The Government will have invested an extra £1 billion per annum by 2019-20 to help hard-working families with the cost of childcare. We are doubling the amount of free childcare to 30 hours for working parents of three and four-year-olds, and from early 2017 tax-free childcare will benefit about 2 million families by up to £2,000 per child. Many families will also be able to claim 85% of childcare costs through universal credit.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank the Minister for that, and especially for the extra £13 million that is being made available to councils such as mine in Staffordshire so that they can roll out the childcare plan sooner. That will help thousands of hard-working families throughout the country. However, will she give particular consideration to what can be done to help families with disabled children and children with special needs?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we are investing more in childcare. Those with disabled children receive £4,000 of tax-free childcare per child. During the last and current Parliaments, we have been rolling out education and healthcare plans for children, including those aged nought to 25 who have more complex needs. We are clear about the fact that our childcare policies must require providers to cater properly for children with disabilities.

Sanitary Products: VAT

17. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What progress the Government are making in negotiating the removal of VAT on women’s sanitary products.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): The Financial Secretary to the Treasury has written to the European Commission and to other member states setting out our strong view that member states should have full discretion in regard to the rate of VAT that they can apply to these products, and that that should be considered in the context of the Commission’s action plan on VAT, which we expect to be published in March.

Paula Sherriff: Frankly, I think that many women throughout the country will be rather disappointed by the Minister’s response. Will she guarantee that the Prime Minister or the Chancellor will come to the House and make a statement once the Commission has responded to our request, so that the public know where we stand before the referendum?

Harriett Baldwin: Of course, the Government do believe that this is something on which we want to take action. I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome the fact that the Chancellor has already announced a new £15 million annual fund to support women’s charities in the interim period before we can tackle this on a unanimous basis across Europe.
EU Solidarity Fund: Flooding

10.35 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister to make a statement about assistance from the EU solidarity fund for flood-hit communities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (James Wharton): First, I want to pay tribute to all those who have supported the many places that were flooded in December and early January; the local authorities, the emergency services, the Environment Agency staff, the community volunteers, the military and many others made a significant contribution to supporting communities affected by the terrible events that we saw over Christmas, in December and in early January. The whole House will want to recognise the enormous effort that has gone into supporting households and businesses, not just the initial response to the floods, but the ongoing work to get residents back into homes and businesses open.

The responsibility for recovery, including matters relating to the European Union solidarity fund, lies with the Department for Communities and Local Government, and officials in DCLG worked hard throughout that period and continue to work hard to support those communities and those affected by those events. The Government recognise that the immediate priority is to respond to the urgent needs of those affected, which is why we have already provided more than £200 million to help those affected by the floods to support recovery and repair. A key feature of our package of support is the communities and business recovery scheme, which is designed to provide ready support to local authorities affected by Storm Desmond and Storm Eva and, in turn, to help individuals, small and medium-sized businesses and communities return to normality. Additionally, it provides property-level resilience grants of up to £5,000, so that people can protect their homes and businesses against future floods by putting in place resilient repairs. To date, under the communities and business recovery scheme, government has paid out a total of £21 million for Storm Desmond and £26 million for Storm Eva. Further payments will follow, and we are also supporting farmers with grants of up to £20,000 to help restore damaged agricultural land and farm vehicles and access and repair boundaries and to address field drainage.

Having set out what the Government have already done, I want now to turn to what more we can do. I am today announcing that the UK Government will make an application to the EU solidarity fund. The EUSF was set up to respond to major natural disasters. The fund was created as a reaction to the severe floods in central Europe in the summer of 2002. Since then, it has been used for 70 disasters covering a range of different catastrophic events, including floods, forest fires, earthquakes, storms and drought. The only time the UK has applied to the fund was following the flooding of 2007, which saw widespread and significant damage across large swathes of England. Member states have 12 weeks from the start of an incident to register their intent to claim. Once we have confirmed our intent, there is time to consider, with the Commission, the elements of assessment. Following this process, the Commission assesses the application and, if it is accepted, proposes an amount of aid to the European Parliament. Once the appropriations become available in the EU budget, the Commission adopts a decision, awarding the aid to the affected state. It is then paid out in a single instalment. When aid is paid out, the affected state is responsible for the implementation, including the selection of operations, and their audit and control. Emergency measures may be financed retrospectively from day one of the disaster, but the EUSF is not, and nor is it designed to be, a rapid response instrument for dealing with the effects of a natural disaster. Financial aid can be granted to the applying state only following an application and budgetary process, which can take several months to complete.

Alex Cunningham: I thank the Minister, my fellow Stockton MP, for his response, which is extremely welcome today. It has taken an urgent question to get the information from the Government, so I am delighted that you granted it, Mr Speaker. I know there has been considerable confusion in government about which Department was responsible for making the application, and I, for one, am delighted at today’s news. I was pleased when the Environment Secretary told the House last month that she was considering an application, only to have one of her civil servants answer my letter to her by telling me it was a DCLG responsibility. We now know the answer today—it is a DCLG responsibility, and I am glad that that Department has actually taken it on.

What we have always known is that it is a Government responsibility to apply to the solidarity fund, and a failure to do so would have deprived our communities of much-needed additional funding to get their homes, lives and businesses back on track. The whole House knows of the devastation that was caused across the country over the Christmas period and into the first months of this year. Recovery costs in Cumbria alone are estimated at £650 million. Other estimates of the total cost suggest that the clean-up bill will exceed £5 billion. It is therefore imperative that the Government do everything possible to maximise resources from all possible areas to support that operation.

I was pleased that, in her statement to the House on 5 January, the Secretary of State said:

“The Government will continue to do what it takes to get those areas up and running and prepare for future events.”—[Official Report, 5 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 70.]

However, for nearly three months, while gesturing a willingness to provide support and assistance, she and the Government have been shy about promoting an application. Members and their constituents have been left totally in the dark, as it appeared that the Government would fail to make an application for help from the EU solidarity fund, which was established precisely to respond to such natural disasters as those experienced in Cumbria, Lancashire, north Yorkshire and Scotland.

The fund has been used by states across the EU in response to 70 disasters, ranging from flooding and forest fires to earthquakes and storms. Just last year, Italy, Bulgaria and Romania received more than £40 million in similar circumstances. You will know, Mr Speaker, that we on the Labour Benches have been extremely anxious that this opportunity could be lost. To be clear, the first floods for which an application could be made in Cumbria were some 11 and a half weeks ago, yet it
has taken the Government to within a single working day of the deadline to confirm that an application is being made. We all know that there are those who quite wrongly believe that we get little from the EU. I am clear that the UK should be embracing the offer of additional support, particularly as we have paid £300 million into the fund since it was set up.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. Will he outline what discussions he has had across Government and with local authorities in the affected areas in the preparation of the application? Why have Members and communities been left in the dark for so long when it would have been a boost to them to know that more help could soon be on the way? What is the final estimate of the cost of the devastation suffered by our communities, and how much are the Government bidding for? Is there just one application, or will there be multiple applications to reflect the fact that a number of communities were affected and that each could qualify due to the level of devastation they have suffered?

Finally, I am aware that my Stockton neighbour and I will be on opposite sides in another debate—that of whether we remain in the European Union. Does the Minister not agree that it is funds such as this that can, and I hope will, bring great benefits not just to communities hit by natural disasters, but to constituencies such as his and mine where there are large numbers of people suffering considerable deprivation?

James Wharton: There seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of the hon. Gentleman. The Department has been working on this application for some time. We had to draw together a range of information across Government Departments, talk to local areas, and assess the cost and impact of events that have taken place. That is what we have been doing, and what we will continue to do. As more information comes through and we go through the process of supporting those communities, we will ensure that the application is thorough, and that it accounts for all opportunities to add to it and to recognise the damage that has been done. Those discussions have been taking place across Government in the right way and in the right timeframe, so that we were able to make our announcement.

I congratulate the officials in my Department and in others who have been working hard to bring all the information together so that we can announce that this application will be made. The application will continue to evolve as more information comes through. As I said in my earlier comments, the European Union solidarity fund is not designed to be a rapid response to events of this kind. It is a longer-term fund to provide compensation to communities. Even though an application is now being made, it will take months for that money to be paid. However, we will continue in our commitment to supporting those communities, providing the funding and the backing that they need. That is what we have done so far and what we will continue to do to ensure that the communities affected by the terrible weather events get the support they need to recover as quickly as possible.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgewater and West Somerset) (Con): I gently say to the Minister and the House, particularly as we have paid £300 million into the fund since it was set up.

James Wharton: My hon. Friend has demonstrated an understanding of the European Union solidarity fund that is absent among those on the Opposition Front Bench. It is a complex fund that requires a number of facts to be taken into consideration. There is an administration process that will take a long time and cost a significant amount. That is why we had to carry out a proper assessment to understand whether it would be of net benefit to the UK taxpayer to make an application before we got to the place where we could make the announcement that I have been able to confirm today. That is the right process, and my hon. Friend has demonstrated from his own constituency experience his deep understanding of the issue and the complexities of the matters before the House.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): I welcome the statement. The Minister talks about the rapid response. Where was the rapid decision-making process on the Government’s part? I welcome the announcement, but it was not a difficult question. If we have an insurance policy, of course we are going to cash it in. Why would we not do so? That is logical and sensible. I welcome it. In relation to Scotland, have the Minister and his Department calculated how much money will be coming to Scotland, owing to Barnett consequentials? Can he say anything about the timescale and when that might be expected?

James Wharton: The rapid response that I was talking about was the money that the Government immediately made available, the hard work that was done by me, my colleagues and officials in DEFRA, the Environment Agency and emergency responders—the work that was done straight away to support the communities affected by flooding. I can confirm that one of the factors that has delayed the process and made it more difficult to carry out the very complicated assessment that underpins the application to the EU solidarity fund has been the slowness of getting the information that we needed out of the Scottish Government. Had they responded more quickly, perhaps we would have been better informed earlier and able to announce with more clarity what would be done.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Three weeks ago I asked the Prime Minister why we were not applying for these funds. I am delighted that we are now doing so. More than 300 of my households were hit by the floods. A third of them were not covered by insurance because of the high premiums and eye-watering excesses. Perhaps some of this extra money can help them. In one case a business, the Ribchester Arms, has been closed since Boxing day. It has lost tens of thousands of pounds and still has ongoing costs.
It hopes to be open by Easter. Can my hon. Friend make sure that Ministers look again at the number of businesses that were hit during the floods to see how much extra assistance, thanks to this money—our money; we are only bidding for our money—we can give them much extra assistance, thanks to this money; our money; businesses that were hit during the floods to see how make sure that Ministers look again at the number of

James Wharton: There are thresholds that have to be met, there is an assessment of damage that has to be done, and there is no guarantee that an application to the fund would yield more money than the cost of applying and delivering it. None the less, we have made that assessment and have come to this decision. I am delighted that it pleases my hon. Friend. I would be happy to have discussions with him about individual businesses in his constituency, but I remind him that regardless of what happens with this fund, the Government have made significant funding available to support local businesses and communities affected by flooding. That funding is available now. We do not have to wait for this fund to come through to support the communities affected.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency was not damaged in the most recent floods, but I know from previous flooding that speed is of the essence. I have known people in my constituency wait not just months, but years, to get their home back to a decent standard. It is all very well for the Minister to be uncharitable and find himself unable to say anything nice about the European Union, which provides the fund. People do not want just the wellies on the day; they want the action after the flooding.

James Wharton: The hon. Gentleman is right—speed is of the essence, which is why the Government have made more than £200 million available to areas affected and made it available as quickly as possible—immediately—for the communities that needed support, so that support is there. This fund will take time to pay out. That is the way the process works. It will take months from the date of application to come to conclusion. We have decided to apply because we have assessed it to be of net benefit to the UK to do so, but the funding that communities needed was provided by this Government straight away.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My hon. Friend says that this is an important application, but will he put it in context? Every day British taxpayers pay £50 million to the European Union. How much does he think we are going to get back: three or four days’ worth of contributions?

James Wharton: My hon. Friend makes his point better than I would endeavour to do from the Dispatch Box today.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The Minister has indicated that all that is required at this stage is a notification of intent to apply. If that is the case, surely he could have got the process under way weeks ago. When did he actually apply? Was it today, or yesterday? How much does he think he will actually recover? The Government have done the assessment, so what do they expect to recover from the European Union? Is he aware that the closure of the A591 in Cumbria is having a massive impact on the local economy—it is costing it £1 million a day—and on local families and businesses? The Government seem to lack a sense of urgency. Will he just get on with it?

James Wharton: I have to make it clear that there was no guarantee that the fund would bring a net benefit to the UK, or that it would be possible to apply, until a proper assessment had been done of the level of damage, the regional thresholds and whether we qualified to make an application. That assessment has now been done and we have announced our intention to apply before the deadline, which is the right thing to do. We will then work through the process to ensure that the UK gets the maximum benefit that can be delivered. Separately from that, the Government are already doing what needs to be done to support communities. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), has been doing a huge amount of work in Cumbria, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows, to ensure that communities get the support they need, regardless of the progress made with this fund. It will take time, but we are now committed to applying to the fund.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the UK paid £36.5 million into the EU solidarity fund last year, making us the second largest net contributor, and that we have only ever claimed once, in 2007, when we received £130 million? Is not the reason we have been reluctant to claim that we get very little out of the scheme because of our rebate? Effectively, we are paying into an insurance scheme that we cannot claim from.

James Wharton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is an interplay between the application for funds, the funds being paid out and the rebate. The reality is that this is a complex process and there are restrictions on how money that is released can be spent. We have made the assessment and believe that the fund will be of net benefit to the UK, which is why we have today announced our intention to apply.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): Today’s announcement is welcome, but it is long overdue. What specific discussions have the Government had with local authorities in Scotland to ensure that the appropriate amount of support is sought for flood-affected communities?

James Wharton: The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. Much of this, as a devolved matter, is dealt with by the Scottish Government, but we have had ongoing discussions with them, including, in the context of the application I have announced today, on the information we need from them to underpin the parts of the application that apply to Scotland.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): This is excellent news. I accept that there are complexities in the EU solidarity fund, but what is unpalatable, and a horrendous burden for the people of Calder Valley, is the £32 million
of infrastructure damage and the shortfall of £15 million for future flood defences. Now that we have applied to the fund, can my hon. Friend assure the people of Calder Valley that the cost of infrastructure repairs and shortfalls in any future flood defences will be met either by the fund or by the Government?

James Wharton: My hon. Friend has been one of the most diligent and passionate advocates for his area; since the storms in December and January, scarcely a day has gone by when we have not discussed matters pertaining to Calder Valley. The Government are absolutely committed to supporting the affected communities, and we continue to work with the local authority to ensure that is done. His representations have been incredibly helpful in informing the process of recovery already, as I am sure they will continue to be.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): May I, too, welcome this announcement, having outlined in my Westminster Hall debate last month the cost of the damage in my constituency and the neighbouring Calder Valley? The Minister has not been quite clear about exactly how much the Government hope to secure from the fund. Following the assessment he has done, can he indicate exactly what value of funding will be available?

James Wharton: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I wish to put on the record on the Floor of the House my appreciation for the constructive nature of the debate we had in Westminster Hall—I think it brings out the best in this place when we pull together to do what we can to support the communities we all represent. As I am sure she will appreciate, we are at the stage of having identified that applying will be of net benefit to the UK. We still have a lot of work to do to finalise the costs and figures that we will submit to the Commission, so I am not in a position to confirm what the entire net benefit will be at the end of the process, but we will of course keep the House updated as progress is made.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): To not give false hope to the communities everyone is talking about today, the Minister must say at the Dispatch Box that there is no guarantee of our ever receiving this money. Domestically, the process is complicated enough, but when we get to the European process, whereby we apply for some of our own money to come back to this country, it becomes even more complicated, and the timeline is extremely long. Will he give us a rough idea of how long the timeline was in 2007? Will he also assure communities that the Government are spending money now that is helping them, and that we will do well in the future even if this money from Europe does not come?

James Wharton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have said, this is not a rapid response fund; the money takes a long time to come through. The Government therefore made more than £200 million available straightaway to provide the support that communities need. My hon. Friend understands Europe better than most, given his experiences and history of working there. What he says is valid, and Opposition Front-Bench Members should perhaps listen to it carefully and take it into account.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): We all welcome today’s announcement, and we all really felt the misery of the people affected when we watched the news on our TV screens. My constituents, particularly those in the West Kirby area, which is vulnerable to flooding, will be pleased to hear this news, but they will be a little baffled about why things have taken so long. I appreciate that work has been going on in the background, as the Minister said, but given what a miserable experience people have gone through, it would have been helpful if the Government had communicated their intention earlier. Will the Minister give an assurance that, should these things happen again, the Government will be prepared to apply to the fund?

James Wharton: I cannot give an assurance that the Government will always apply to the fund, because we may not always meet the threshold criteria to apply. We will always have to assess the cost-benefit to ensure that the cost of managing and delivering the fund does not outweigh the benefit that could come from it, and that includes, of course, the impact on the rebate. However, regardless of the fund, we have provided more than £200 million up front to ensure that communities such as those of which the hon. Lady speaks get the support they need.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s decision. Will he give an assurance that, if the application is successful, it will not be used to offset funding already allocated from other resources and that it will actually make more resources available to improve defences along the Humber estuary and elsewhere?

James Wharton: We do not yet know what the final quantum will be, or how long the money will take to be paid. What matters is ensuring that communities get the support they need now. The Government have made, and are making, that support available, and we continue to work with local authorities to deliver it. That is our priority, but we are confirming that this fund will be applied for, and we will, of course, keep hon. Members updated as we progress through the process.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Businesses in my constituency, and in the borough of Rochdale, are absolutely baffled about why the Government have left it until the eleventh hour to apply for this vital funding. Will the Minister please assure me that he will get the application in by Sunday? Does he not also agree that the fund is a great argument for remaining in the European Union?

James Wharton: I am disappointed that the hon. Lady’s local businesses are baffled, but I am sure that, on leaving the House today, she will wait not a moment to explain to them the reality of the process. As I have said, this is not a rapid reaction fund. We have to ensure that we meet thresholds, and we have to assess damage. There is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that we fully understand and apply for every bit of applicable damage, and we have announced that we will undertake that process. In the meantime, we have ensured that we have made funding available. It will still take many months for the fund to pay out, but we are pursuing that process.
Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgewater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), will the Minister please advise the House what support the Government can give small businesses and homeowners to improve resilience against future flooding and to prevent these things from happening again?

James Wharton: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, which provides a timely opportunity to remind Members, and indeed local authorities, that the Government are making up to £5,000 available for flooded properties through the property-level resilience grant. We are encouraging owners to apply for that funding to improve resilience. We are being flexible so that grants can be pooled, allowing multiple properties to invest in joint flood defence schemes. We have provided more than £200 million, and that is one aspect of this, but it is important to improve resilience for the future.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): If this were not so serious, the antics of the British nationalists on the Government Benches would be quite funny; perhaps they should learn something from lastminute.com. The Minister said that the Scottish Government took a long time to respond. The reality is that the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities wrote to the Department, and the Deputy First Minister raised the issue on the floor of the Scottish Parliament. Is this the Minister’s long-winded, long-awaited response?

James Wharton: I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman’s question was, but the reality is that the UK Government responded immediately to the weather events that we saw over December and January. We made funding available, and we gave local authorities freedom and control over how it was to be spent and delivered to support people affected by flooding. That is the right thing to do. There is still work to be done on the recovery. We are doing that work and will continue to do it until all communities feel that they can get back to normal and back open for business, as so many places already are, and we can move on from what has been a very difficult period for so many.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Hundreds of my constituents in Nottinghamshire have benefited from the repair and renew grants, or resilience grants, which are operated by the Minister’s Department and seem to be operating well in getting money to people very quickly. In my constituency, a number of constituents did something very altruistic and chose to pool their repair and renew grants, not just for small community projects but to put towards whole-village or whole-town flood defence schemes. Thanks to the valiant efforts of the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), we managed to find a work-around so that that was achieved. Will the Minister assure me and other Members that elsewhere in the country such community-wide altruistic schemes can be a way of using the £5,000 repair and renew grants?

James Wharton: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Absolutely: the £5,000 resilience grant for each property can be pooled as long as the properties concerned benefit from that pooling. We have designed the schemes to be as flexible as possible in responding to different circumstances in different places, but most importantly to respond quickly, unlike the fund that we are discussing, which, important as it is, will take several months from this date until it is seen to pay out.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): My constituents in Hull who were badly flooded in 2007 would have been aghast if the Labour Government at that time had not immediately said they would apply for the solidarity fund. When exactly was the decision made to make the application? The Minister is not offering much reassurance when he says that there is still much work to do if the deadline is this Sunday.

James Wharton: The intention, in accordance with the process that exists, is to indicate our intention to apply. I would be staggered had any Government immediately announced an intention to apply for the fund, because we cannot do so. We have to assess the impact on regional GDP and assess the costs to know whether we qualify. It might be easy to announce an application but then find that we do not qualify to apply. The responsible thing to do is to assess the costs and the potential benefit and then make a decision to apply, in time, if it is appropriate to do so. That is what this Government have done.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I welcome what the Minister has said today and his recent visit to Pendle. I thank him for the Government’s decisive action to address flood risk, including the Environment Agency’s commitment to spend more than £500,000 this year on addressing flood risk in the village of Earby in my constituency. Will he join me in encouraging the many tourists and visitors who regularly visit flood-affected parts of the UK to show their support by visiting this Easter or this summer?

James Wharton: I thank my hon. Friend. Many of the areas that were affected by flooding in December and January are some of the most beautiful parts of our country and of the north of England, and there are businesses across those communities that are very much open for business. We are encouraging people to continue to visit, or to consider visiting, those wonderful places to support their economies and communities. Many of them are open almost as though nothing had happened, working through what has been a trying period that has none the less shown the very best of the community spirit that exists right across the north.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Given that large parts of Greater Manchester were flooded, I welcome the Government signalling their intention to apply for these funds. The Minister implied that they have been working on the detail of the bid for some time, so will he clarify the detail of what they intend to use the funds for? Will it be to assist local authorities with the ongoing reconstruction work after the floods, or will it be to future-proof our flood defences?

James Wharton: The Government’s priority is to support the affected communities today. We have ensured that funding is available immediately to do that. We are still working through the process of the fund application, and we will continue to do that for as long as it looks
like it will produce a net benefit to the UK. We will pursue it and ensure it is delivered, because we can see its benefit to communities. What matters to communities such as those that the hon. Gentleman represents is the quick response, the funding that is made available and the support that is given to local authorities to deliver immediately on their immediate needs and for their recovery thereafter. That is what we have done, and we continue to make funds available to do it. We have made that commitment and will stick to it.

**Business of the House**

11.5 am

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** Will the Leader of the House give us the future business?

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling):** The business for next week is as follows:

**Monday 29 February**—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the European Union referendum, followed by Opposition day (un-allotted half day). There will be a half-day debate on the UK steel industry on an Opposition motion.

**Tuesday 1 March**—Estimates (1st allotted day). There will be a debate on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the 2015 spending review, followed by a debate on the reform of the police funding formula.

[The details are as follows: First Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, The FCO and the 2015 Spending Review, HC 467, and the Government response, HC 816; and Fourth Report from the Home Affairs Committee, Reform of the Police Funding Formula, HC 476.]

**Wednesday 2 March**—Estimates (2nd allotted day). There will be a debate on the science budget, followed by a debate on end of life care. At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates, followed by proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill. Further details will be given in the *Official Report*, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.


**Thursday 3 March**—Debate on a motion on gangs and serious youth violence, followed by general debate on Welsh affairs. The subjects for both debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Friday 4 March**—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 7 March will include:

**Monday 7 March**—Second Reading of the Policing and Crime Bill.

**Tuesday 8 March**—Remaining stages of the Enterprise Bill [Lords] (day 1), followed by a debate on a motion on International Women’s Day. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Wednesday 9 March**—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Enterprise Bill [Lords] (day 2), followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

**Thursday 10 March**—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill, followed by business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

**Friday 11 March**—Private Members’ Bills.
I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 3 March and 7 March will be:

**Thursday 3 March**—Debate on the offshore oil and gas industry.

**Monday 7 March**—Debate on an e-petition relating to the income threshold for non EU citizens settling in the UK.

-Chris Bryant: Mr Speaker, as I am sure you are away—[Laughter.] It hasn’t started very well, has it? As I am sure you are aware, today is St Æthelbert’s day. I hope you are not confusing him with the other St Æthelbert, who was king of East Anglia, or any of the other Anglo-Saxon saints, like St Athwulf; St Bertha, St Congar or, of course, Sexwulf, who was the bishop of Mercia who founded Peterborough Abbey. Today’s St Æthelbert was king of Kent and died in 616. It is particularly relevant that we commemorate Æthelbert today, as he was the first king to establish laws in these lands banning blood feuds. I suspect that the out campaign and the Conservative party need him.

After all, when George Galloway turned up at an out campaign the other day, half the room left; Nigel Farage thinks that Gove, Cummings and Johnson are too clever by half and has sacked all his deputies; the Prime Minister is furious with the Justice Secretary for saying that his deal on the European Union is not legally binding; the Johnsons are engaged in a full-blown family bust-up; and the Mayor of London seems to be feuding with himself. Only this month, he wrote that leaving would mean “diverting energy from the real problems of this country”, but now he wants to do precisely that. He is not so much veering around like a shopping trolley as off his trolley, if you ask me.

The Prime Minister and the Mayor maintain that they are still friends. As St Æthelbert might have said, greater love hath no man for himself than this, that a man lay down his friend for a chance of getting his job.

Talking of mothers’ advice, my mother told me three things. First, if it is free, take two. Secondly, never take home a man who is wearing a hat until you have seen him without the hat. I can see that the Leader of the House agrees with that one. Thirdly, and more importantly, never trust a man who is wearing slip-on shoes. I merely point out that the Prime Minister was wearing slip-on shoes yesterday.

Now we know that the referendum period will run from 15 April until 23 June—[Interruption.] Do keep calm. Would it not make sense for the Queen’s speech to be delayed until after the referendum in late June or early July? The House did not sit in the immediate run-up to the referendums in 1975 and 2014 because they coincided with normal recess dates. Should we not do the same in relation to this referendum in June: rise on 16 June and return on 27 June?

I know what you are thinking, Mr Speaker. The Government’s business is so threadbare, how on earth can we keep the Session going until 1 July? I have a suggestion for the Government. They could simply hand the rest of the business over to us. We could, first, abolish the bedroom tax; secondly, save our steel; thirdly, repeal the gerrymandering of parliamentary boundaries; and, fourthly, force Google to pay its fair share of tax, just as the French Socialist Government did. They are charging Google £1.3 billion in tax, as opposed to this shabby little Tory Government, who are letting Google get away with just a tenth of that: £130 million.

I welcome the nearby St David’s day debate on Welsh affairs. It will give Members a chance to welcome the 750 new jobs that have just been announced by Aston Martin, thanks to the work of the Labour Government in the National Assembly; to point out that cancer survival rates have improved faster in Wales than anywhere else in the UK; and, most importantly, to congratulate Subzero, whose new ice cream parlour in the Rhondda has served 10,000 customers in just 11 days, proving that all those blasted migrants who came to the valleys from Italy in the 19th century did us a big favour by giving us frothy coffee and the best ice cream in the country. Is it not time you made sure that we had Subzero here in Westminster, Mr Speaker?

I welcome the International Women’s Day debate on 8 March, when I hope we will be able to raise important questions, such as the horrifying statistic that violent crime, including domestic violence, has risen by 23% in south Wales in recent years. However, may we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on the Dame Janet Smith review into sexual abuse by Jimmy Savile? Something was terribly wrong at the BBC for a long time. Staff knew what was going on but were terrified to say anything. Auntie lost her way; children were abused and the victims were badly let down. We must, surely, make sure that that never happens again.

Finally, private Acts of Parliament have been published on archival paper rather than vellum since 1956, and now the House of Lords has recommended that public Acts follow suit to save money. As you will recall, Mr Speaker, our Administration Committee published a report in which it agreed with the Lords, and the Leader of the House agreed with that report at the Members Estimate Committee that you chaired on 2 November. During the recess, for some bizarre reason, the Minister for the Cabinet Office stuck his oar in, and said that he was going to pay to keep on using vellum. That is a parliamentary decision, and it has absolutely nothing to do with the Government or the Cabinet Office. Will the Leader of the House please tell the Cabinet Office to butt out, and will he allow a vote on the matter so that all Members can make their views known?

-Chris Grayling: I must say that if I was the shadow Leader of the House I would not have picked today to bring up the issue of the European Union referendum. You may not know this, Mr Speaker, but all Labour MPs have apparently been asked to take to the streets on Saturday to campaign to keep Britain in the European Union. You may not be surprised to learn that one or two Conservative Members may be on the streets to campaign for Britain to leave the European Union, but what about the Leader of the Opposition? He is going on a CND anti-nuclear march, even though his deputy said yesterday that he would vote to keep Trident. You really could not make it up.

Another two weeks have passed, and the shadow Leader of the House is still in his place and still a
paid-up member of the Corbyn fan club. I knew his party leader was a disciple of Marx, but I did not realise that the hon. Gentleman was a disciple not of Karl Marx, but of Groucho Marx, who famously said:

"Those are my principles, and if you don't like them...well, I have others."

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Queen’s Speech and the flow of business. I can assure him that this House will continue to consider the Government’s extremely important agenda, which is making and will continue to make a real difference to this country. In 10 days’ time, we will have another Second Reading debate, on the important reforms in the Policing and Crime Bill, and we will shortly bring forward the Investigatory Powers Bill. He need have no fears: this Government have a strong and continuing agenda for this country, which we will continue to pursue.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Aston Martin. May I say how delighted I am about Aston Martin’s decision for Wales? It is good news for the people of Wales and good news for the United Kingdom. It is a tribute to the way in which this country is being run and to the favourable economic climate that exists under this Government, which is why big and small businesses are investing in this country.

I echo what the hon. Gentleman said about the report on the BBC and what has been said this morning. What took place is clearly absolutely shocking. Lessons need to be learned not just in the BBC, but in institutions across this country. It is inexplicable to our generation how these things could have been allowed to happen over all those years, but we must not think such things could not happen today and we must make sure they never happen today. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will be in the Chamber next Thursday, and I have no doubt that he will want to discuss the issue then.

The question of vellum is a matter for the House of Lords. The House of Lords will reach a decision, and that decision will be final.

There is exciting news for beer drinkers around the country. For the princely sum of £6, people can now drink their favourite pint out of their own Jeremy Corbyn pint glass. I think there will be a stampede. I do not know whether the shadow Leader of the House has a Corbyn pint glass. I think there will be a stampede. I do not know whether the shadow Leader of the House has a Corbyn pint glass. I think there will be a stampede. I do not know whether the shadow Leader of the House has a Corbyn pint glass. I think there will be a stampede.

Surprisingly, the hon. Gentleman did not ask for a debate on public spending and the economy. That may be because he agrees with the former shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie), who has said that the Labour party’s current approach to public spending is to place all its faith in what he called a “magic money tree”, by promising to reverse every cut and to spend, spend, spend. I think we should wish the previous shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls, a happy birthday today. I never imagined that the Labour party would miss him so much.

Perhaps the Scottish nationalists can be excluded from this, but may I ask the shadow Leader of the House to join me in congratulating Wales on its victory over Scotland in the Six Nations during the recess? I did, however, still hear the tones of “Delilah” coming from the crowd, as usual, at that match. Welsh rugby fans obviously pay no more attention to what he says than anyone in this House does.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On Monday, the Prime Minister said that the Government would publish a lot more documents relating to the European Union. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what those documents are likely to be and when they will be published? Will he guarantee that the documents will be subject to independent audit and scrutiny by this House?

Chris Grayling: This House will of course have plenty of opportunity, including in its Committees and indeed in the debate today, to discuss what has already been published and what will be published. Anything that is published by the Government will of course have to go through appropriate checking by the civil service and will be subject to all the rules set out in the European Union Referendum Act 2015.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I, too, thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

I think it would be appropriate to congratulate Adele on her four Brit awards yesterday evening and Coldplay on becoming the British act with the most Brit awards. The deputy Leader of the House and I enjoyed the ceremony last night, I think it would be fair to say.

We are being a bit short-changed today. We have heard a business statement from the “out” side of the Cabinet, but there is no business statement from the “in” side of the Cabinet. The Leader of the House, who is the leader of the no campaign too, has the opportunity to spread his pernicious “no” agenda for the next hour or hour and a half. When will we get to hear the business statement from the “in” side of the Cabinet, because this week marked the end of collective Cabinet responsibility, particularly for the next few months?

The nasty civil war in the Tory party is starting to get serious. It looks like the poor old Justice Secretary will be first for the boot. I do not know whether the Leader of the House will rush to his defence and man the barricades to try to save him. Even friendships that go right back to the playing fields of Eton look like the remnants of a Bullingdon night out. For my colleagues on these Benches, it is popcorn time as we observe not just a civil war in the Tory party, but the ongoing civil war within the Labour party.

I am going to do something very radical on Tuesday. It is not to declare a unilateral declaration of independence for Scotland or announce MP4’s Eurovision participation—I am going to do something much more radical. In the debate on the estimates, I am going to attempt to debate the estimates. Apparently, that has never been done. I say “attempt” because I have had conversations with the Clerks and it is more than likely that I will be ruled out of order for attempting to debate the estimates on estimates day, because the one thing we are not to debate on estimates day is the estimates. Where in the world, other than in this absurd House, could that possibly be the case?

I just want to remind the House what the estimates are. They are the consolidated spending of the Departments of this nation, but we have no opportunity to debate them. The Leader of the House will remember very
clearly that during the debate on English votes for English laws, he made it very clear to us that all issues of Barnett consequentials were to be bound up in the debates about the estimates, yet we have no opportunity to debate them. It will be right and proper of you, Mr Speaker, to rule me out of order if I attempt to debate the estimates—that is the natural consequence—but we have to end the absurd notion that we cannot even start to debate departmental spending in this House.

We got a deal on the fiscal framework this week and I think that everybody is absolutely delighted. I congratulate the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister on stopping the Treasury trying to diddle Scotland out of £7 billion. However, I want to ask what happens next, because the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said in front of the Scottish Affairs Committee that the fiscal framework would come back to this House for further scrutiny.

Mr Chope indicated assent.

Pete Wishart: I can see that the hon. Gentleman is indicating assent, but he does not think this side of the House is entitled to have the fiscal framework that was agreed between the UK and Scottish Governments

Lastly, I do not know whether the Leader of the House is on speaking terms with his no longer good friend the Prime Minister, but, if he is, will he tell him to please stay away from Scotland for the next few months? We value our European membership in Scotland, so will the Prime Minister please stay away? In the meantime, there is a warm invitation to the Leader of the House, the Justice Secretary and the Mayor of London to come to Scotland any time.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and it is a matter of great concern, particularly with the recent incident of a plane having had to turn back after a laser attack. None of us would wish there to be danger of a serious aviation disaster as a result of that completely inappropriate behaviour. The Transport Secretary will be in the House on Thursday week. I will ensure that he is aware of concerns that have been raised, and my hon. Friend might also like to raise them with him.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Lord Adonis made most interesting comments on the radio yesterday afternoon, suggesting that the Government should prioritise a number of early and less expensive investments in our railway infrastructure. I have proposed detailed schemes for—among others—the west coast main line, east coast main line, and the Birmingham to London line. I put those suggestions in a formal submission to the House of Lords, which has been referred to in this House. Others will no doubt have their own proposals, so will the Leader of the House make time for an early, full debate on railway investment?

Chris Grayling: I have a lot of sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman and Lord Adonis have been saying, and one thing that has characterised this Government’s approach, as well as that of the rail industry since privatisation, is the opening of new stations and the re-opening of lines. A second route has recently been opened from London to Oxford—a sign of a flourishing industry that we want to grow and develop with large...
projects and small. As I said, the Transport Secretary will be in the House in 10 days’ time, so perhaps the hon. Gentleman could make his point to him. We believe in the future of our railways, and they are an essential part of the transport system of this country.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Is the Leader of the House aware that the renegotiation package for the EU referendum is based on an international agreement and lacks the enforcement mechanisms of EU and domestic law? Is it correct that any such agreement must conform to EU law and, to the extent that it does not, that EU law will prevail?

Chris Grayling: That matter will be subject to lively debate this afternoon in the House and over the coming weeks. The view of the Attorney General, the Government’s senior law officer, is that the agreement reached in Brussels last week is legally binding on all members of the European Union.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware—I have written to him about this—that earlier this week an important debate on knife and gang crime was bumped by Government business, urgent questions and a statement. We have rescheduled that debate for Thursday 3 March. On 8 March we have International Women’s Day, and a debate sponsored by the Backbench Business Committee. Will the Leader of the House allow us protected time so that such an eventuality does not occur again, particularly since that debate has been scheduled specifically because 8 March is International Women’s Day?

Many hundreds of thousands of people are now missing from electoral registers around the country. Yesterday, we had the initial findings of the Office for National Statistics on what size constituencies should be by population. We now have something that might drive people to register: the European Union referendum. Will the Leader of the House take back to the Cabinet the question of whether the Boundary Commission’s work should be put on hold to see whether the hundreds of thousands of people who have not registered can register in time for the referendum? Boundaries could then be drawn up on the basis of the real electorate, rather than the electorate back in December.

Chris Grayling: I will take away the hon. Gentleman’s point about International Women’s Day, which I absolutely understand is time-sensitive to that day, and I will continue to bear in mind what he asks for regarding protected time. At the moment, however, it does not feel as if there is a long pipeline of delayed debates. What happened this week was unfortunate, but it was better that the debate was moved rather than severely curtailed.

On constituency boundaries, the Boundary Commission process takes place over two years. There will be plenty of time for the Boundary Commission to adapt and for individual Members to make representations for changes if they do not believe that a recommendation is correct. [Interruption.] I hear the shadow Leader of the House chuntering from his place as usual. I just hope, from his point of view, that his constituents in the Rhondda like him as much as his colleagues on the Back Benches do when it comes to determining whether he gets a new seat following the boundary changes.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I was perturbed to hear today that BBC Radio 5 Live could be moved to online content only. While this would relieve the nation from the embarrassment of colleagues in this House playing—to give it a more tasteful title—kiss, marry or avoid on “Pienaar’s Politics”, it could deprive the nation of an outstanding sports and news radio broadcaster. May we therefore hold a debate in this place to address the need for the BBC to continue to be funded, as befits the nation’s broadcaster?

Chris Grayling: The subject of the BBC charter renewal is a very live one. I suspect that many of us have had emails about it. The Government’s view is that we want to preserve the BBC as a high quality public service broadcaster. It will, of course, be a matter for the BBC to decide how best to deploy its resources. We have to ensure, given that it is a levy on households of all different backgrounds and circumstances up and down the country, that the BBC operates cost-effectively and keeps the licence fee as low as possible.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I notice that the Leader of the House failed to respond to the shadow Leader’s very sensible suggestion that the recess and the Queen’s Speech be scheduled to take account of the EU referendum. Will the Leader of the House give a proper response, especially given that the outcome of the referendum itself could have a major impact on the legislative programme?

Chris Grayling: The point I made in my remarks was that the Government have a full programme and will continue to have a full programme. It is really important that we do not allow the EU referendum to divert us from the very important task of governing the country. We will continue to deliver the right solutions for the country, and we will continue to bring forward the right legislation for the country. We will, of course, consider how best to ensure that hon. Members have the right opportunities to participate in the referendum, but we need to ensure that the governing of the country is not diverted by what is happening.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): My constituents, Mr and Mrs Vaughan, have been waiting four years for an assessment of their continuing healthcare costs for a deceased relative, despite an assurance that the clinical commissioning group had made attempts, with extra resources, to clear a backlog. Will the Leader of the House make time for a statement from the Secretary of State for Health on the delays to retrospective continuing healthcare costs assessments, because it is causing enormous distress to my constituents and, I am sure, to many others?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend speaks with his customary effectiveness on behalf of his constituents. This issue affects a number of Members and constituents up and down the country, and I will make sure the Health Secretary is aware of the concerns he has raised and ask the Department of Health to respond to him.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): What is the view of the Leader of the House on the legal status of the Prime Minister’s European agreement? Does he agree with his successor as Justice Secretary or does he agree with the
Attorney General, whose view he mentioned earlier? The Leader of the House was the only Lord Chancellor not to be a lawyer. He therefore has an advantage in terms of plain speaking, so who does he agree with: the Justice Secretary or the Attorney General?

Chris Grayling: Fortunately, I am not a lawyer, so I am not going to give the right hon. Gentleman legal advice. I would say what I said earlier—that the view of the Attorney General on behalf of the Government is that it has legal force, but I am sure that this is going to be a matter of lively debate in the weeks ahead.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): The Leader of the House will no doubt be aware that, over a short time span, two separate debates took place in Westminster Hall on serious allegations of collusion between banks and valuers in order deliberately to undervalue and then seize assets. Numerous other cases have now come to light, and more than 10 MPs of different parties have written to the Chairman of the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills to ask him to investigate. A particular situation, which involved Barclays bank and Lambert Smith Hampton, has led to my constituent Bryan Evans losing everything he has worked for over many years, including, recently, his house. Is it not time for a debate on the Floor of the House on these matters so that we can decide whether the Government need to act to ensure that the law is upheld?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is working hard and effectively on behalf of his constituents. He will understand that I cannot comment on the detail of the allegations. I know that the Solicitor General addressed a Westminster Hall debate on this specific case and on the role of the Serious Fraud Office earlier this month. Of course, the SFO, in conjunction with others, has considered these allegations from the outset, and my hon. Friend is well aware of the conclusions that have been reached. If he takes the view that the SFO’s remit should be broader to take matters such as this one further, I would encourage him to bring the matter to the attention of Treasury Ministers when they are before the House next week and perhaps look to bringing back to the Floor of this House a debate on the broader remit of the SFO and the ability of that organisation and others to investigate such matters.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Leader of the House aware that if the clinical commissioning group and the Government have their way, Huddersfield, a large university town, is likely to be one of the only such large towns to have no A&E facility within five miles? Does he agree that we need an early debate on what is going on with these CCGs? Why are we seeing all this pressure on the health service when the Prime Minister said during the general election that he would preserve A&E in the towns and cities of this country?

Chris Grayling: This issue has, of course, affected my own constituency, where it has led to a lively debate for a while. We have entrusted local doctors with decision making about the configuration of services. In my own area, it was certainly the view of local doctors that prevailed over plans for reconfiguration 18 months ago. It is really down to the hon. Gentleman’s local GPs and those who control commissioning in the area to decide on the configuration of services. My advice, having been through this myself, is to make sure that he discusses the issue with them and brings their views forward. That is what made the big difference in my area.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): You may like to know, Mr Speaker, that my petition to save the hedgehog has now reached over 19,000 signatures since it was launched two weeks ago. I am fully aware that that is about 80,000 short of meeting the requirement for a parliamentary debate, but will my right hon. Friend confirm that because it has more than 10,000 signatures the Government must write to me to clarify what they might actually do?

Chris Grayling: I congratulate my hon. Friend, as always, on his assiduousness on this issue. I can confirm that he will receive a proper response from the Government. I have a sneaking suspicion that he may make his way to that 100,000 point in order to secure a debate in this House. This week, of course, we have had a cautious tale, linking some of the themes that sometimes appear in business questions. We talk about superfoods, and we talk about black puddings from Stornoway and Bury. We learned this week that if we feed meat to hedgehogs, it can have a rather adverse effect on them, as we saw in the tragic case of the hedgehog that has become so fat on eating meat that it cannot even roll itself up.

Mr Speaker: We are all better informed than we were.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): My constituent Lance Bombardier James Simpson sadly lost both legs in Afghanistan, but he has since inspired people by becoming the first double amputee to do an obstacle challenge. He and other brave injured servicemen, however, have found that the NHS cannot cope with their artificial limbs. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health on how the NHS can solve the problem and come up with a better plan to help our brave servicemen and women?

Chris Grayling: I was not aware of this. Those who have served this country and lost limbs in its service are people whom we should admire without reserve. Some of the achievements of those injured servicemen after their return from the front line have been simply awe-inspiring. I was not aware of the problem that the hon. Gentleman has raised today. The Secretary of State for Defence will be here on Monday, but I shall also ensure that the Department of Health is made aware of the hon. Gentleman’s concerns and responds to him.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I hope that the whole House will join me in congratulating the Mayor of London, my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), on his wise decision—much publicised this week—to name Crossrail the Elizabeth line in order to commemorate the Queen’s 90th birthday. My patriotic constituents in the village of Worthington would also like to commemorate that event, but they have been hit by the county council with a £400 bill for road closure. May we have a statement
from the Government on the issuing of guidance to county councils proposing that they waive such charges, as was done during the Jubilee celebrations?

Chris Grayling: I, too, was delighted by the decision to name Crossrail the Elizabeth line, which is a fitting tribute to a magnificent monarch as she approaches her 90th birthday. We should all celebrate all that she has done for this country. I hope that local authorities will be wise and sensible, and will encourage communities to come together to take part in the celebrations that will take place this summer. Let me add that I think this has been a week in which my hon. Friend the Mayor of London has shown great wisdom.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): On 19 February, at North Middlesex hospital, more than 100 patients were told over the tannoy, “Please go home unless you have a life-threatening illness.” Of course, they would have to self-diagnose to be able to make that decision. Some patients had been waiting on trolleys for more than five hours with no cubicle space and no ward beds to go to, while dozens were in a waiting room facing a wait of more than eight hours to be seen.

This is a crisis in A&E provision, certainly for Enfield and Haringey and, I think, more widely, and it was entirely predictable, particularly given that the Government closed the A&E department at Chase Farm hospital in 2013. Many of my constituents sat waiting that night, and they are outraged at this situation. May we have an early debate, in Government time, about the A&E crisis that is affecting Enfield and Haringey and other areas?

Chris Grayling: I do not know about that particular circumstance, but pressures on A&E obviously ebb and flow depending on local circumstances, especially at this time of year, and that this is one reason why we continue to put additional funding into the national health service. I seem to recall that, some while back, the former Health Secretary argued that putting more money into the NHS was not the right thing to do.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I am sure Members agree that we do not discuss Europe enough in this place. May I make the helpful suggestion that we alter the business of the House in order to hold a weekly European Union Question Time? According to my prejudice, the Leader of the House himself would answer the questions. I would then have an opportunity to ask, for instance, “Should the British people, in their wisdom, leave the European Union, would it be this to ask, for instance, “Should the British people...”

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Chris Grayling: It is, of course, a very important issue. It was unfortunate that on Tuesday, with the extended statement on Monday from the Prime Minister and the volume of additional subjects Members wanted to bring before the House, that the debate ended up being squeezed out. We made sure that there was an early opportunity for the Backbench Business Committee to bring it back to the House, and when we debate it on Thursday, it is much less likely to be under the pressure of time than it was on Tuesday, which was a particularly unusual day in terms of parliamentary time.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This week has seen the welcome news that the Avanti Schools Trust has secured planning permission for the first state-sponsored Hindu “all-through” school. In addition, Hujjat school, which will be the first Muslim school in Harrow, has also secured approval from the Department for Education and has reached the first stage, thereby ensuring that parents in Harrow will have the opportunity of giving a faith-based education to their children if that is what they want. Will my right hon. Friend arrange for us to have a debate on the importance of faith-based education to allow parents to exercise their choice and ensure that they get the education for their children that they wish to have?

Chris Grayling: I congratulate all in my hon. Friend’s constituency who have succeeded in bringing forward these exciting new plans. It has always been my view that faith-based education has an important place in our society. While it is important that a faith-based school is not a school of one faith, my experience is that the ethos a faith-based school brings delivers a high quality of education, and what is happening locally is very exciting. I am sure he will take advantage of the opportunity to express to the Secretary of State, when she is here shortly for questions, just how important a part of this Government’s policy that work is.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Government have amended substantially their own Enterprise Bill to include provisions on Sunday trading. Can the Leader of the House explain how Back Benchers who are concerned about the English votes for English laws—[Interruption.]—concerning the effect of new proposals made by the Government?

Chris Grayling: These proposals will, of course, be the subject of debate in Committee and, if Members choose, on Report on the Floor of the House, but the advice that the hon. Gentleman seeks is best obtained from the Clerks.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Can a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement explaining what action the Government are taking to protect holders of the Lloyds bank enhanced capital notes from enforced early redemption? Several constituents have contacted me to say that they have been forced to close these. That has had a great effect on their planned income and they have received very little protection from the Financial Conduct Authority.

Chris Grayling: I am aware of those concerns, and my hon. Friend is doing his usual effective job on behalf of his constituents. The essence of what he is arguing relates to the remit of the FCA and its ability to do the job he would wish in a matter such as this. Of course, Treasury Ministers are here on Monday and I advise him to bring that matter to them, as they are ultimately responsible for setting the remit of that authority.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Leader of the House may be aware of the horrible murder of the Cambridge student Giulio Regeni in Egypt. He disappeared six or seven weeks ago and his body was found horribly mutilated a few weeks later. He is much missed by the academic community in Cambridge, and he was carrying out academic duties at the time. I pressed the Foreign Secretary to urge the Egyptian authorities to explain what has gone on. Will there be an opportunity to discuss the situation in Egypt soon?

Chris Grayling: This was a horrible incident and our hearts go out to Giulio Regeni’s family, his friends and all his colleagues in Cambridge. Although Egypt is a great country, it still faces significant issues and challenges. I will make sure that the Foreign Secretary is reminded of the concerns the hon. Gentleman raises, and I have no doubt that the Government will want to set out an opportunity for discussing matters across the middle east generally, which will give him the opportunity he seeks in the near future.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Tomorrow evening, I will be attending a residents’ meeting in Cleethorpes, accompanied by the Humberside police and crime commissioner, Matthew Grove. He was been particularly effective as a channel for representing his constituents. Ahead of the May PCC elections, may we have a debate on the role of PCCs and how their powers may be extended?

Chris Grayling: Matthew Grove will always have a fond place in the Conservative lexicon as the man who beat John Prescott to that job of PCC for Humberside. That was a matter of huge disappointment to Labour Members—[Interruption.]—Clearly, the shadow Deputy Leader of the House is not a fan, but after that victory we will always regard Mr Grove fondly.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): My constituency has benefited tremendously from European Union structural funding, and of course that will not be available if we leave the EU. May we have a statement as to the advantages that EU structural funds have brought to the most deprived communities of the UK? Would the Leader of the House be willing to deliver such a statement personally?

Chris Grayling: Of course we have a debate this afternoon on this area, so the hon. Gentleman may want to take part in it. Those on the Government side of the argument would say that EU structural funds are important, but I am sure that those who disagreed with that view would say that in fact all we are doing is giving money to Brussels in order for those there to give it back to us.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Notwithstanding the debate we have just had on flooding, there is another part to this issue that we hardly discuss at all in this House—coastal erosion.
This year, there has been more erosion around the UK coasts, because of the storms coming from America, than there has been for many years. May we either have time in this Chamber to debate this or have a statement on the subject? Figures show that up to 74,000 homes could be at risk over the next 100 years, so we need to make plans now to be able to look to the future and ensure that we are successful in tackling this.

**Chris Grayling** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The importance of the issue has been brought home to us by the extraordinary archaeological work done around the historic port of Dunwich, which was once one of England’s largest towns but which has almost completely disappeared. We understand from that work just how much difference coastal erosion can make. My hon. Friend makes an important point and I suggest that he might like to join others whose constituencies are affected, including those who represent areas on the east coast of England, to secure a debate via the Backbench Business Committee.

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May we have a statement or a debate in Government time on the extraordinary allegations published by London’s *The Times* last week on the treatment of asylum seekers living in Glasgow by Home Office providers Serco and Orchard and Shipman? There were allegations of, among other things, the spraying of air fresheners towards asylum seekers; physical intimidation; and the placing of asylum seekers in uninhabitable housing. Does the Leader of the House agree that such dehumanising treatment of asylum seekers merits Ministers reporting directly to Parliament?

**Chris Grayling**: No one would condone that kind of treatment of any individual no matter who they are in our society. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which I am sure will have been noted by Home Office Ministers.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Hull City Council is meeting at the moment to set its budget. Since 2010, it has had a cut from the Government of £310 per person, which, considering that it is the 10th most deprived area of the country, is one of the steepest cuts. In the same period, Epsom and Ewell, one of the least deprived areas, has gained £13 per head. Hull has none of the options that wealthier areas have to raise its own money, and has not received a penny of the £300 million that the Government have found for other areas. Can we please have a debate on why the poorest areas of this country keep being subject to cuts by this Government?

**Chris Grayling**: The hon. Lady needs to remember the huge disparities that still exist in funding per head. Targeting northern towns and cities such as Hull where there are bigger social challenges is important. As a Government, even a Conservative Government with a substantial number of Members representing constituencies in the south with a lower grant per head, we continue to believe that it is important to provide support to those towns and cities.

**Mr Mark Williams** (Ceredigion) (LD): The Government’s mobile infrastructure project identified 600 potentially new mobile mast sites, yet by December last year, only 15 had been built. May we have a full debate on the failure of the Government’s mobile infrastructure project, which is due to end in March, and on why so many communities that were promised mobile connectivity still lack it?

**Chris Grayling**: We are making real progress in spreading both mobile coverage and high-speed broadband coverage. We have a way to go. Of course such things are not always the responsibility of Government. It is the operators, not the Government, who build masts. None the less, I continue to believe that we are doing as well as almost all of our major international competitors in ensuring that we have modern communications.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On 7 November last year, I wrote to the BBC on behalf of a constituent with a set of perfectly reasonable questions about its musical output and its relationship with Universal Music. The response I got was, to say the least, disappointing. Not only did it fail to answer any of the questions, it told me that, if I was unhappy with its response, I should take up the matter with the Information Commissioner. I value the work that the BBC does, but it must be open about how it operates. May we have a debate on creating a transparent culture within the BBC, particularly in its relationship with publishers such as Universal Music?

**Chris Grayling**: Let me make two points. First, the hon. Gentleman can raise that issue next week when the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is in the House. Secondly, we are embarked on just such a debate at the moment on the renewal of the charter. It is for members of the public across the country and Members of this House to bring forward their thoughts about the future shape of the BBC. [Interruption.] Despite the fact that the shadow Leader of the House is, as usual, chuntering from a sedentary position, I have no doubt that, if the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) wants to bring forward further thoughts and present them to the Secretary of State, they will be taken into account.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It was welcome when the Government agreed to change the rules to allow for fair compensation for military veterans suffering from mesothelioma. However, if they are serious about the armed forces covenant, can we now have a statement on why they have still not closed the loophole whereby a small number of veterans diagnosed before December are not covered and are being caused further distress at this most difficult time in their lives?

**Chris Grayling**: I am not aware of that small number of cases. The Secretary of State is here on Monday, and I will ensure that he is aware of the hon. Lady’s concern. If she wants to bring that matter to him then, he will be able to give her a more detailed response.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Government’s childhood obesity strategy has been prebriefed and then delayed not once but five times. The answers that I am getting from Ministers, including the Prime Minister, who cannot even tell me whether he has seen a draft copy of the strategy, have been not worth the paper they are written on. May we have a statement...
as soon as possible outlining the Government’s intentions to publish the childhood obesity strategy and finally break this wall of silence from Ministers?

Chris Grayling: Of course it is the Government’s intention to publish the childhood obesity strategy, but we are also working on getting it right. I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that, when we come to publish that document, when it is ready and we are satisfied that it is the right tool for the job, we will bring it to the House.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Extraordinarily, the Prime Minister has made 233 appointments to the unelected House of Lords since he was elected, making a seam-bursting total of 826 Members, yet only yesterday many of us here received an email from the Boundaries Commission informing us of a forthcoming review of the Chamber to reduce the number of Scottish MPs from 59 to 53, which will result in the House of Lords being 40% larger than this House. Will the Leader of the House bring to this Chamber an urgent debate on the rough wooing of our democracy in Scotland, where we will have more Tory Lords than MPs apparently representing our country?

Chris Grayling: It is important to remember that this is the elected House. This is the House that ultimately has the final say on matters, and it is right and proper that we have a structure of representation here that represents the balance of the population of the country. It is the case that the Boundary Commission has a remit to align the size of constituencies across the country. That matter is not related to the other place. It is about ensuring that there is fairness of representation in this elected House, which is the one that ultimately decides what happens in this country.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My constituent Andy is a freight train driver. He and his colleagues across 11 depots in Yorkshire and the north are under threat of redundancy following the downturn in coal traffic due to the imminent closure of Ferrybridge and Eggborough power stations and the closure of Kellingley pit. May we have a debate in Government time on the secondary impact of these closures, the unemployment that this Government have caused in the supporting industries such as freight, and how we might support those affected to find new and appropriate jobs?

Chris Grayling: Of course it is always difficult when an individual change within an industry costs jobs or leads to closures, but the hon. Lady has to understand that under this Government rail freight has continued to grow, the rail network has continued to receive new investment, and for those in the rail industry there are perhaps more opportunities today than there have been for a very long time.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Edward Paddon, the son of my constituents Fiona and Scott, was just nine days old when he died, in part as a result of group B streptococcus ascending infection. Instead of looking forward to what would have been Edward’s second birthday in a few months, his parents are campaigning so that others do not have to suffer as they have. May we have an urgent debate about what can be done to ensure consistent and accurate screening for group B strep so as to prevent any more avoidable deaths of newborn babies?

Chris Grayling: This is an important and sensitive issue on which there are many opportunities to bring forward debates through the Backbench Business Committee or the Adjournment debate system. As I should have mentioned earlier, we now have the largest petition we have yet seen calling for a debate on the Floor of the House relating to meningitis in childhood. I will be discussing it with the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee because I hope that that petition is debated on the Floor of the House, rather than in Westminster Hall.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we please have a statement on today’s Ofcom review of Britain’s broadband needs? It pointed out that too many rural communities have a very poor broadband service. This Government must do better.

Chris Grayling: We have made good progress so far but there is still work to do. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will be here next Thursday and will be able to update the House on progress. Compared with many other countries, we are doing pretty well, but as long as there are rural communities that do not have access to high-speed broadband and to modern communications, we will continue to have a job to do.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Two weeks ago the Leader of the House was unable to answer whether legislation to ratify the Istanbul convention would be laid before the House, citing the Queen’s Speech. If he and his merry men are successful in pulling us out of the EU, will the Government still have the appetite to ratify that Council of Europe convention which aids the protection of women, or do they plan to rescind membership of that organisation also?

Chris Grayling: I have no doubt that if the people of this country vote to leave the European Union, we will continue to play a very active role in the international bodies of which we are part and in the international community as a whole. Whatever happens regarding the future of this country, we will always be internationalists and we will always do the right thing by this country on the international stage.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): The incompetent Tory-Labour administration—a coalition running Stirling council—will present its budget this evening. That will include savage cuts to social care across the Stirling area. Given the pressures being put on local government finance by the Government’s austerity agenda and the welfare reforms, may we have a debate on this urgent matter?

Chris Grayling: The overall framework for economic success and for funding in Scotland rests with the SNP. The interesting thing about the fiscal framework this week is that the SNP Government will have to take
decisions in the future about getting the right balance between lower taxes and public spending, and they will find that it is a whole lot more difficult than they think.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Farmers in my constituency tell me that the basic payments scheme has delivered late and is somewhat chaotic. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State on the performance of the Rural Payments Agency?

Chris Grayling: I am very happy to draw the Secretary of State’s attention to the hon. Gentleman’s concerns. If he would like to write with specific details and examples, that will make it easier for Ministers to look into what is going wrong.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): May we have a debate or a statement on early-day motion 1138?

[That this House notes with serious concern proposals by the Government, published on 6 February 2016 on www.gov.uk, for a new clause to be inserted into all government grant agreements, determination letters, from the new financial year, and no later than 1 May 2016, which states that payments supporting activity intended to influence or attempt to influence Parliament, government or political parties, or attempting to influence the awarding or renewal of contracts and grants, or attempting to influence legislative or regulatory action will not be counted as Eligible Expenditure costs; further notes that the Government itself describes this as an anti-lobbying clause; shares the concerns expressed by many third sector and voluntary organisations outlined in a letter to the Prime Minister dated 11 February 2016, among them the impact the clause may have on the ability of voluntary organisation to bring real-world experience of service users and evidence-based expertise into the public policy debate, and that those organisations working on programmes receiving any grant funding may be prohibited from speaking to hon. Members about developments in their local area, suggesting improvements to policy or legislation, responding to the Government’s own consultations, meeting ministers to discuss broader issues and evidence from their programme or even from giving evidence if called by a select committee, and that the clause may therefore have a far broader impact than originally intended; believes the proposals leave the Government vulnerable to accusations of stifling criticism and informed debate about the consequences of its policies; and calls on the Government to urgently reconsider the introduction of this clause.]

It relates to the anti-lobbying clause—the gagging clause—announced by the Cabinet Office just before the recess, with little or no scrutiny or consultation. The clause threatens the ability of organisations and charities in receipt of Government grants to speak out or campaign either for or against Government policy. It should be scrapped immediately.

Chris Grayling: What the hon. Gentleman has to understand is that while in government we have found on a number of occasions bodies that we are funding using taxpayers’ money to lobby us, which makes no sense at all. The Cabinet Office is trying to deliver a sensible regime, and I am sure that he will be able to debate the provision in the way he wishes when it comes before the House.
Points of Order

12.6 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your assistance in relation to a matter that is of some concern to me. It has been brought to my attention that on Monday, outwith my presence and without notifying me in advance, the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) raised what he described as a point of order, during which he said that I had misled the House. I should make it clear that, notwithstanding his conduct, I have afforded him the courtesy of notifying him that I would be raising this point of order today.

On Monday afternoon I asked the Prime Minister what provision he would make in a British sovereignty Bill to recognise that the principle of the unlimited sovereignty of Parliament is a distinctively English principle that has no counterpart in Scottish constitutional law. In the last part of my question I quoted directly the words of a distinguished and now deceased Scottish judge, Lord President Cooper, in the well-known Session case of MacCormick v. Lord Advocate in 1953. The judge’s comments were obiter dicta—that is to say, an expression of opinion not essential to the decision—and therefore not legally binding as a precedent. However, they were an expression of his learned opinion and have been given due weight in the years since. Other distinguished judicial figures, or to give a view from Blackstone.

It is perfectly in order for the hon. Member for South Leicestershire to disagree with me, particularly if he can vouch his position, but it is not in order for him to say that I have misled the House, especially when I had taken trouble to use my words carefully and was quoting a well-known dictum from Scots law. As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, it is a matter of particular concern to me, given my professional background, that I should not be represented as having misled the House. I am keen to have your assistance in how the record might be put straight.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for notice of her point of order, of which, as she has informed the House, she has notified the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). By the way, for the avoidance of doubt, I have to decide what is and is not in order; that is simply the constitutional position. I confirm that Members should indeed inform a colleague of an intention to refer to him or her. The point of order raised on Monday by the hon. Member for South Leicestershire was—I think I can so describe it—moderately orderly in form, although, as I noted, it was not orderly in content, and for one quite simple and straightforward reason: it was not a point of order. As a mere politics graduate, I do not intend to adjudicate between two learned Members—I know that the hon. and learned Lady is a distinguished QC—on obiter dicta by senior judicial figures, or to give a view from the Chair on Dicey. The hon. and learned Lady has made her point with characteristic force and eloquence. May I suggest that we leave it there?

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to raise a point of order regarding rules of behaviour and courtesies in this House. During Prime Minister’s questions yesterday—at a time when junior doctors are looking at yet another strike in England, and when Scotland may be dragged out of the EU unwillingly or unfairly, based on polls there on the Brexit—we had a spat between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition about a mother’s opinions on behaviour and dress codes, yet SNP Members have been told off for clapping in the House. I raise the issue because we have had a huge number of complaints in the form of emails and phone calls from our constituencies. I wanted to ask for your advice on what the rules of behaviour should be and how they should be implemented, and also on whether the Prime Minister should give the House a full and proper apology for his conduct?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. There is an important distinction here between the content of what is said and the way in which, more widely, hon. and right hon. Members behave. In respect of the first, may I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that it would not be right, or in any way favoured by the House, if the Chair, as a matter of regular course, were to try to intervene to prevent Members from expressing their own views with such examples, or references to people outside the House or to members of their families, as they think fit? I should not get involved in that, and the House would not want me to do so.

However, in respect of the second part of the hon. Gentleman’s point of order—that is to say, on the overall notion of good behaviour—perhaps I can just repeat what I have many times said: the public expect us, or would want us at any rate, to conduct our arguments robustly and, doubtless, with passion, but with respect for the fact that different opinions exist. Loud heckling and organised barracking are widely deprecated outside this House. The notion that there is something clever about it, and that it is all very good fun, seems to me to be completely perverse, and I would very politely say, with no reference to any particular hon. Member, that perhaps all hon. Members, before indulging in noisy heckling, barracking or ad hominem abuse, should ask themselves this: would I be content for my behaviour to be seen and heard by my constituents? It is our constituents that we are here to serve. The point is so blindingly obvious that only a very clever and sophisticated person could fail to see it.

Perhaps we can leave the matter there for today, but I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I rather suspect that the flurry of emails that he might have received about conduct will not be an isolated case—I get quite a lot in my own office.
European Affairs

12.13 pm

Mr Hammond: I beg to move,

That this House has considered European affairs.

In just under four months’ time, the British people will face a choice—one that has been denied to them for many years—that we pledged to give them in our election manifesto and that we are now delivering; a choice that will have profound consequences for this country for a generation or more—whether to remain in the European Union on the basis of the deal negotiated by the Prime Minister or to leave.

The last time the British people were consulted on this question, 40 years ago, the answer was a clear yes, but much has changed in that 40 years, and the fact that we are still deciding this referendum means that it is one of the most significant choices that we will ever face. The answer to the question that we have to answer is not: do we like it? The question we have to answer is whether we are stronger, safer and better off in the EU rather than out of it. Stronger, safer, because working together with EU partners, will have profound consequences for this country for a generation or more. Our national finances, and they have set up the Office for Budget Responsibility. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. That was a very discordant noise—nothing like as mellifluous as the voice of the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), to whom I know the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) will shortly be apologising.

Sir Edward Leigh: Well, back to my theme. We have set up the Office for Budget Responsibility. The Foreign Secretary is rightly doing a sort of cost-benefit analysis of this issue. Why do the Government not institute an independent study, by a genuinely independent body, to go in some detail into the effects of a Brexit, plus or minus, on, say, GNP? That would surely be very useful.

Mr Hammond: The problem with the challenge my hon. Friend presents—it is going to be a recurrent theme in this debate, I suspect—is that we simply do not know what the counterfactual is. We do not know what Britain’s situation outside the European Union would be. We do not know whether a deal could be negotiated with the remaining 27. We do not know what free trade agreements could be negotiated with other parties, and we do not know on what timescale those could be achieved. We do not know what damage would be done to our economy in the meantime. I fear that the objective analysis my hon. Friend is seeking might be very difficult to achieve.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The Foreign Secretary is advancing the case of the economic benefit of Britain’s membership of the European Union, and he may like to hear the verdict from Britain’s manufacturing industry. Yesterday, at the Engineering Employers Federation, I took part in a debate with a senior member of the Vote Leave campaign, at the end of which 800 of Britain’s manufacturing companies voted by 83% that they would prefer Britain to stay in the European Union. That is what is happening in the real world among real people who make real things for Britain’s benefit.

Mr Hammond: I am unsurprised by the figure that my right hon. Friend quotes, because in the world of manufacturing, where supply chains are increasingly complex and internationalised, the operation of the single market, and particularly the operation of the customs union, will be increasingly important to the competitiveness of British businesses. There are substantive reasons that business can see for remaining in the European Union, and he may like to hear the verdict from Britain’s manufacturing industry. Yesterday, at the Engineering Employers Federation, I took part in a debate with a senior member of the Vote Leave campaign, at the end of which 800 of Britain’s manufacturing companies voted by 83% that they would prefer Britain to stay in the European Union. That is what is happening in the real world among real people who make real things for Britain’s benefit.

Mr Hammond: Yes, it has. First as Defence Secretary, and now as Foreign Secretary, I have seen how, in practice, working with EU partners is an important tool in our armoury. Of course, the EU will never, in any way, replace the security benefit that we get from NATO: it does a different thing. However, we have seen in the conflict over Ukraine that economic sanctions—which, in reality, are the only practical weapon available to us in responding to the challenge of Russia—when properly honed and consistently used by the European Union, will prove to be a very important weapon in our armoury against Russian aggression.

Sir Edward Leigh: The problem that my right hon. Friend quotes, because in the world of manufacturing, where supply chains are increasingly complex and internationalised, the operation of the single market, and particularly the operation of the customs union, will be increasingly important to the competitiveness of British businesses. There are substantive reasons that business can see for remaining in the European Union, and he may like to hear the verdict from Britain’s manufacturing industry. Yesterday, at the Engineering Employers Federation, I took part in a debate with a senior member of the Vote Leave campaign, at the end of which 800 of Britain’s manufacturing companies voted by 83% that they would prefer Britain to stay in the European Union. That is what is happening in the real world among real people who make real things for Britain’s benefit.
Mr Hammond: I will take one more intervention and then I must move on.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I appreciate that the Foreign Secretary is just a couple of minutes into his speech, but in the opening minute we heard a series of negative words used to describe our relationship with the European Union. I think I might have heard the words “suspicious” and “sceptical”. I wonder what our friends in France and Germany might be thinking as they watch this debate when somebody who is apparently in favour of our being members of the European Union is using such language. Coming from the in campaign, is this the type of debate that we can expect in relation to our relationship with Europe?

Mr Hammond: I think it is important that our friends and partners in Europe understand—I say this to my colleagues very regularly—that for the great majority of people in this country there is no passion about a European vision. We find in some European countries genuine passion for the idea of Europe, but that is not the British way. Lots of people in this country believe that we should remain in the European Union because it is good for Britain and good for our economy—because we are stronger, safer, and better off. That is not the same as being passionately attached to some idea of a European vision.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: I am going to make a little progress, if my right hon. and hon. Friends will allow me.

The PM’s pledge was to engage with our partners in Europe to agree a series of reforms to get the EU back on track and to change the terms of our membership to protect our interests, and then to put the question to the British people. He has delivered on that pledge.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hammond: I will in just a moment.

So the question is this: should we stick with what we know, bank the gains that the Prime Minister has brought back from Brussels, and continue to fight from the inside for reform, or should we take a leap into the dark? For me, the answer is clear: I am a sceptic who think I might have heard the words “suspicious” and “sceptical”. I wonder what our friends in France and Germany might be thinking as they watch this debate when somebody who is apparently in favour of our being members of the European Union is using such language. Coming from the in campaign, is this the type of debate that we can expect in relation to our relationship with Europe?

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Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hammond: I will in just a moment.

So the question is this: should we stick with what we know, bank the gains that the Prime Minister has brought back from Brussels, and continue to fight from the inside for reform, or should we take a leap into the dark? For me, the answer is clear: I am a sceptic who will vote with my head to remain because I know in my heart that that is what is right—what is best—for Britain.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I share the Foreign Secretary’s view that what the Prime Minister has returned with is better than what we had before, but will he say something about the legal status of the agreement, particularly the assertion by the Lord Chancellor, no less, that it is not legally binding? I respect the fact that the Lord Chancellor takes a different view from the Prime Minister, but how can his position as a senior legal Minister for the Government possibly be tenable when he is arguing that the deal is not legally binding and the Downing Street position is the precise opposite? Surely his position is untenable and Cabinet collective responsibility has been stretched too far.

Mr Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the principle of collective responsibility has been suspended in respect of this debate to allow Ministers to express a different opinion from that of the Government. Our position is clear: this is a legally binding agreement. It was registered yesterday at the United Nations as a treaty. The overwhelming majority of qualified legal opinion recognises that it is a legally binding international law decision.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and then I must make a little progress.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend explain what effect registering the document at the UN has, and on what basis he says that any of this is legally binding?

Mr Hammond: I am not a lawyer, so it is not a question of the basis on which I say it is legally binding, but there has been a plethora of qualified legal opinion supporting the view that it is a legally binding decision. Registering it at the United Nations records it as a treaty-status international law obligation. The document will be taken into account by the European Court of Justice, whose own decisions in the Rottmann case have established that it must have regard to interpretative decisions by Heads of State and Governments. The document itself makes it clear that it is legally binding.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hammond: I am going to make a little progress. Let me recall what we set out to achieve and what has been delivered. First, we set out to protect British jobs and ensure a level playing field in Europe for British business, because the creation of the eurozone and the greater level of co-ordination needed between eurozone countries created a very real risk either that non-Eurozone countries such as Britain would be dragged into integration that we do not need and do not want, or that our businesses would suffer discrimination because of our decision to retain our own currency. So alongside the crucial exemption from steps of further integration, we needed to negotiate clear safeguards for the pound, the exemption of British taxpayers from eurozone bailouts, protection against discrimination for Britain’s world-leading financial services industry, a clear role for the Bank of England, and a clear commitment that we will have a full say in the functioning of the single market while not being part of the single currency. This deal delivers all those demands in a legally binding agreement, underpinned by the commitment by all EU member states to enshrine those UK safeguards in treaty change.

Sir William Cash rose—

Mr Hammond: I thought my hon. Friend might take his cue from my using the words “legally binding” again.

Sir William Cash: But what the Foreign Secretary is not doing is using other words that are part of this package—not only “legally binding” but “irreversible”. 
As he knows, the question of whether this is irreversible is highly contentious. It is clear from the evidence that has been received, and indeed from the European Scrutiny Committee’s report, that it is not irreversible.

Mr Hammond: I have to disagree with my hon. Friend. The decision is irreversible unless Britain chooses to allow it to be reversed, because it could be reversed only by all 28 member states agreeing. I can assure him that, certainly for as long as this Government are in office, Britain will never agree to that happening.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that this morning’s BBC interview with the former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen was very useful? He explained that Denmark’s opt-outs with the European Union are based on exactly the same type of legal basis and have not been reversed in the years that they have been in place.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady is exactly right. The Danish agreement has been in place for 23 years and continues to serve Denmark extremely well.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hammond: I am going to make a little progress now.

The second area we set out to address was Europe’s impact on competitiveness. We have achieved a commitment to completing the European single markets in services—a key area for Britain given the importance and competitiveness of our services sector—in digital; in energy, to ensure greater competition and lower energy bills for British households; and in capital, ensuring greater access to sources of finance for our entrepreneurs. We have also delivered a clear commitment to prioritising international trade agreements with the largest and fastest-growing economies across the globe, with the potential to boost our economy by billions of pounds a year; and agreement to cut the burden of EU regulation on business, with specific targets to be set for key sectors. That builds on a programme of work that the Commission is already undertaking, which has already slashed by 80% the pipeline of regulatory proposals, and bakes the deregulatory approach into the DNA of the European Union.

The third area in which this deal delivers is in ending the abuse of the principle of free movement to work in order to access the benefits of our welfare system, which are paid for by hard-working British taxpayers. We have already ended access to unemployment benefits and social housing for new arrivals and limited their time in which to find a job to six months. The package agreed last Friday gives us new powers to exclude criminals from EU countries, and stops EU nationals dodging British immigration rules to bring family members from outside the EU to live in Britain.

Under this agreement, we can apply our rules, including on minimum income and English language competence. It ends the unfairness of child benefits at British rates being sent to children living in countries with much lower living costs, and it gives us a new seven-year emergency brake to ensure that EU migrants will not have full access to in-work benefits until they have been in the UK for four years, answering the perfectly reasonable question: why should people take out when they have not put in? Under this new arrangement, they cannot do that—no more something for nothing. Taken together, this is a package that will address the concerns of the British people about abuse of our benefit systems and erosion of our immigration controls.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On child benefit, will the Foreign Secretary confirm that the agreement does not meet the promise set out in the Conservative party manifesto, which said:

“If an EU migrant’s child is living abroad, then they should receive no child benefit or child tax credit, no matter how long they have worked in the UK and no matter how much tax they have paid?”

That has not been achieved. It is a failure.

Mr Hammond: As I have said before in this House, any reasonable person will look at the package that has been delivered. We have been clear from the outset that tackling abuse of our welfare system is about reducing the pull factor that makes the UK a target for inward migrants because they can get their wages topped up with a variety of benefits. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. Although my hon. Friend can pick on a specific part of the package, I think that most reasonable people will want to look at it in the round.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP) rose—

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) rose—

Mr Baker rose—

Mr Hammond: Let me make a little progress. The fourth area in which this deal delivers concrete change is in protecting us from political integration under the mantra of “ever closer union”. The British people have never believed in political union and have never wanted it, and now there is a clear and binding legal commitment to a treaty change to ensure that the United Kingdom will never be part of it. That is a crucial change that alters fundamentally the UK’s relationship with the EU, setting out clearly, in black and white, that the UK’s destination will be different from that of the rest of the EU.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): The promise on child benefit was in our manifesto, so what will people think of the 2020 Conservative manifesto if we promise things we cannot deliver?

Mr Hammond: The Prime Minister gave a commitment to go to Brussels, to negotiate hard and to bring back the very best deal that he could achieve. That is what he has done. I think that people will look in the round at the commitments that were made and what has been delivered. In the end, it will be the British people who give their verdict on that package.

Patrick Grady: The Foreign Secretary has talked many times about the opinions of the British people, but does he not accept that there is a divergence of opinion across the United Kingdom, with a clear majority in Scotland in favour of remaining in the EU and
considerably more sympathetic to the European project? I grew up in the Scottish highlands, where there are bridges and roads that simply would not exist without the gold-starred blue flag pinned alongside them. There is a lot more sympathy and appreciation among the people of Scotland for the positive things that the European Union has achieved.

Mr Hammond: This is a UK-wide question and a UK-wide referendum. I sincerely hope that when the dust has settled and the counting is done, the hon. Gentleman will discover that a significant majority of people across the United Kingdom believe that Britain is better off, stronger and safer inside the EU. When the debate plays out, however, I hope he has a stronger argument than, “They bunged us a few quid to build a road”, because, frankly, that is not a sustainable argument across the European Union as a whole.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: I am going to make a little progress. I am happy to take interventions, but in doing so I am conscious that I am eating into the time available for debate.

We have also set out to strengthen the powers of this Parliament and of the British people. In the last Parliament, we legislated, through the European Union Act 2011, to ensure that no more powers could be handed to Brussels without the explicit consent of the British people in a national referendum. That Act introduced a vital check on the one-way ratchet of the transfer of powers from Westminster to Brussels.

This deal goes further, breaking the ratchet once and for all, with a new mechanism to return powers from Brussels to national Parliaments. For new legislation, the UK Parliament, working with the other national Parliaments, will be able permanently to block proposed EU legislation that a majority of them do not want, through a red card system.

The declaration, signed by all 28 member states, that we secured at the European Council last Friday is, as I have said, legally binding in international law and has already been registered as a treaty at the United Nations. Authoritative legal opinion is clear on this point. It cannot be undone without the consent of every single member state, including Britain. The agreement commits all member states to changes, in due course, to the EU treaties to enshrine the protections for Britain as a non-member of the eurozone, and to confirm explicitly that ever closer union does not apply to the UK.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way a second time. He phrases himself incredibly carefully. He says, quite correctly, that the agreement is binding in international law, which is not justiciable, but it is not binding in European law, where it has only to be taken into account by the European Court of Justice. Nor is it irreversible, otherwise section A(7) could not say:

“The substance of this Section will be incorporated into the Treaties at the time of their next revision in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Treaties and the respective constitutional requirements of the Member States.”

If it requires the respective constitutional procedures of the member states, that means that if they are not followed, it will not be implemented.

Mr Hammond: In the Rottmann decision, the ECJ itself made clear that it had to take account of a decision of this nature. I say to my hon. Friend and others who repeatedly make points about the legally binding nature of agreements that we are having a substantive debate about the future of Britain, in or out of the European Union. We have a package that has been agreed by all 28 countries and endorsed by their Heads of State and Government. It is not only legally binding, it is a solemn political commitment. I advise colleagues to address themselves to the substantive issues that we are debating, namely Britain’s place in the European Union and what the world would look like from the perspective of a Britain outside the EU.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I want to take the Foreign Secretary back to the serious substantive point that he made at the outset of his speech. He and the Prime Minister claim that somehow this deal enhances the security of Europe. By asserting that the EU has a role in the defence matters of Europe, they are going down an extremely dangerous line, playing into the hands of those such as Mr Juncker, supported by Chancellor Merkel, who want an EU army. There is a real risk that NATO will be undermined. The Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister should address that issue, rather than have a junior spin doctor in No. 10 twisting the arms of former senior military officers to sign a letter to The Daily Telegraph, from which two signatories have already resiled.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend, who served with me in the Ministry of Defence, will know that no one is as alert as I am to the risks of undermining NATO’s crucial role in underpinning the defence of western Europe. We have always been very clear that any role played by the European Union in our defence must be complementary to, and in no way undermine, the role of NATO. I remind him that, when we took part in the counter-piracy operation to interdict terrorists pirating ships crewed by British citizens off the coast of Somalia, it was led by a British admiral based in Northwood, but it was a European Union mission that carried out the task. We have to look for roles in which the European Union can augment our security and safety. We are seeing that across the piece in organised crime and counter-terrorism. We see it today, and we have seen it in past years.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con) rose—

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con) rose—

Mr Hammond: I will make a little progress, if my hon. Friends will allow me.

These changes, taken together with our existing opt-outs from the euro, from Schengen and from justice and home affairs measures, give Britain a special status within the EU; indeed, it is a unique status. That gives us the best of both worlds: a seat at the table to protect our interests, but a permanent opt-out from those areas
of the EU that we reject—out of ever closer union and political integration, out of Schengen, out of the euro and out of eurozone bailouts.

This is a significant package, delivering the substantial, legally binding and irreversible changes that we promised. But let me be clear: no one is suggesting that it solves all the problems of the EU. The deal is not the end of the reform of the EU, but it is an important step on the road.

No matter which side of the debate we are on, I hope that we will at least be able to agree across the House that the decision will be one of profound significance for the future of our country. It will be a choice that determines our trajectory for a generation or more. Let me be clear: the Government will respect the outcome of the referendum, whatever the result. There will be no second referendum. The propositions on the ballot paper are clear, and I want to be equally clear today. Leave means leave, and a vote to leave will trigger a fixed two-year time period. To do otherwise in the event of a vote to leave would represent a complete disregard of the will of the people. No individual, no matter how charismatic or prominent, has the right or the power to redefine unilaterally the meaning of the question on the ballot paper.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary is absolutely right to make it clear that this is a one-time referendum and that the decision is in or out. If it is out, I think that the British people need to know what they would be going out to. Does he agree that it is about time the vote leave-ers set out precisely their vision of Britain outside the European Union?

**Mr Hammond:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I am about to come to that point. I hope that my remarks might provoke some of my hon. Friends to put some flesh on the bones of what leaving might mean. I will say something about the consequences of, respectively, a vote to leave the EU and a vote to remain.

**Nick Herbert** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

**Mr Hammond:** Let me make my point, and then I will happily give way to my right hon. Friend. A vote to leave is a vote for an uncertain future. That is a simple fact. That uncertainty would generate an immediate and negative reaction in financial markets; on that, all market commentators agree. Indeed, the mere possibility of a leave vote will have a chilling effect on business confidence even before the referendum.

**Mr McFadden:** It is already happening.

**Mr Hammond:** As the right hon. Gentleman suggests from a sedentary position, we have had a foretaste of that this week in the currency markets.

A vote to leave would trigger a fixed two-year time period under the treaty for the UK to negotiate the terms of our exit from, and our future relationship with, the EU. We would, of course, seek to reach agreement with the other 27 member states during that two-year period. In the meantime, however, we would be able to offer British businesses that wanted to invest no assurance at all about their future access to EU or other markets. We would have nothing to say to Japanese, American or Chinese companies that come here looking for a base from which to produce for the EU market. That would be truly a leap in the dark, and the effect would be to put the economy on hold until the negotiations were completed. At the end of those two years, there is no guarantee that agreement would have been reached, but our exit would be automatic unless every single one of the remaining member states agreed to an extension of the negotiating period.

**Nick Herbert:** My right hon. Friend is rightly drawing attention to the potential impact of Brexit on our economy, but may I take him back to the issue of security? It was suggested earlier that there would be no adverse consequences for security from our leaving the European Union, because we would remain members of NATO. Did he hear the remarks this morning of the former Secretary-General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who said:

> If the UK were to leave the European Union, the voice of the UK would be weakened?"

He concluded:

> I would strongly regret if Britain were to leave the European Union. A lot is at stake when it comes to security."

Should we not listen to former Secretaries-General of NATO, as well as to former military commanders, and have some respect for their views?

**Mr Hammond:** Mr Fogh Rasmussen is not merely a former Secretary-General of NATO, but a former Prime Minister of Denmark. That country can tell us something about the binding and enduring nature of protocols that are made in EU negotiations. It is important to acknowledge that security comes in different parts: military security and defence, but also security against organised crime and against terrorism. The EU makes its most important contribution to our overall security in the latter two.

**Alex Salmond** (Gordon) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary invokes article 50. Before notification was given under article 50, given that the referendum is an advisory one in terms of the constitution, would there be a vote in Parliament? Would there also be a vote in the Scottish Parliament, given the impact on devolved competencies under the Sewel convention?

**Mr Hammond:** The Government’s position is that the referendum is an advisory one, but the Government will regard themselves as being bound by the decision of the referendum and will proceed with serving an article 50 notice. My understanding is that that is a matter for the Government of the United Kingdom, but if there are any consequential considerations, they will be dealt with in accordance with the proper constitutional arrangements that have been laid down.

**Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I rather concur with the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), because I think that before the Government could move to any action as a consequence of the referendum, it would be essential for Parliament to debate the matter and for the Government to obtain consent from Parliament.
[Mr Bernard Jenkin]

On the question of what happens if we leave, may I enlighten the Foreign Secretary? First, there is no obligation to go for article 50. Secondly, we would be taking back control over our borders, our laws and the £10 billion a year net that we give to the European Union. It would buy us plenty of options, which the Government seem determined to prevent us from even discussing.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend raises again the suggestion that there is no need to treat an exit vote as triggering a notice under article 50. He seems to suggest that there is some other way of doing it. He raised the question on Monday and I looked into it, because he caught my imagination, but I have to tell him that that is not the opinion of the experts inside Government and the legal experts to whom I have talked. We are bound by the treaty until such time as we have left the European Union. The treaty is a document of international law, and Ministers are obliged under the terms of the ministerial code to comply with international law at all times.

The UK’s current access to the single market would cease if we left the EU, and our trading agreements with 53 countries around the world would lapse. It is impossible to predict with any certainty what the market response would be, but it is inconceivable that the disruption would not have an immediate and negative effect on jobs, on business investment, on economic growth and on the pound. Those who advocate exit from the EU will need to address those consequences—the substantive consequences, of the kind that the British people will be most focused on—in the weeks and months of debate to come.

I want to say something about the environment in which the putative negotiations would be conducted, because it is crucial to understand how difficult the discussion would be.

Over the past 18 months, I have got to know pretty well my EU counterparts, and in many cases their senior officials, as well as the opposition figures in most of their countries and key figures in the Commission and the European Parliament. There is, perhaps surprisingly, an overwhelming consensus among them about the importance of Britain remaining a member of the EU. However, they, too, are politicians: they, too, have constituents to whom they are having to explain, even now, why Britain adds so much value to the EU that it has to be allowed a unique and privileged set of arrangements that are not available to any other member state. They have, collectively, already invested a lot of political capital in delivering on Britain’s agenda. I tell the House, frankly, that if we reject the best-of-both-worlds package that has been negotiated by the Prime Minister and if we reject the unique and privileged position in the European Union that is on offer to Britain, the mood of goodwill towards Britain will evaporate in an instant. That would be our negotiating backdrop. To those who say they would have to negotiate—

Mr Nigel Evans: Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr Hammond: I will in a moment, but this is important. People are talking about a negotiation that we might have to have with 27 other member states as they go into such a negotiation. To those who say that they would have to negotiate a sweetheart trade deal with a UK outside the EU, I say this: there will be no desire at all among the political elites of the remaining 27 member states to help an exiting Britain show that it can prosper outside the EU. On the contrary, they will interpret a leave decision as two fingers from the UK, and we can expect precisely the same in return. The idea that they will go the extra mile to ensure that Britain can remain a destination for foreign direct investment to serve the EU market or that our financial services industry can compete in the European market on a level playing field is, frankly, fantasy land.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hammond: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Mark Pritchard: I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary—

Mr Jenkin: Rent an MP!

Mark Pritchard: I am showing respect, and I am sure my hon. Friend would want to show respect as well. I think if you insult people, you have a weak argument.

Does not the United Kingdom have a veto over foreign policy in Europe? If we were to leave the European Union, the United Kingdom would have less influence, by definition, on European Union foreign policy, and it would be more likely that European Union foreign policy was dominated, for good or bad, by France and Germany.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. These are the complexities: obviously, if we were outside the European Union, we would not be bound by any foreign policy of the European Union, but, equally, we would not have any influence and, in this case, that influence is decisive because of our veto over that policy. It is a judgment, and people will have to weigh up the pros and cons.

Richard Drax: The Foreign Secretary used the expression “the political elites”. He slipped into using it just naturally. The political elites are the main problem, because they ignore the voter. If that goes on, it will just happen more and more.

Mr Hammond: Rather to my surprise, I agree with my hon. Friend. I shall use the phrase “the political elites” again in my speech, because he is absolutely right: there is a gap between what the political elites in some European countries are thinking and what their voters are thinking. However, on the subject we are discussing—a putative negotiation on Britain’s future relationship with the European Union—the reality is that our negotiators would have to engage with those political elites.

Mr Nigel Evans: Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr Hammond: I will in a moment, but I want to make a little more progress.

In addition, any market access we agreed with our former EU partners would come at a very high price. We know that because we know what the basic models are for access to the single market for non-EU member states. We can look at Norway: pay up as if you were a
member state, accept all the rules as if you were a member state, allow full free movement across your borders as if you were a member state, but have no say, no influence and no seat at the table; or Switzerland: spend eight years—

Mr Jenkin: It's silly.

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend says it is silly, but it is a fact that that is where is today. It is a fact that it took Switzerland eight years to negotiate piecemeal access to the single market sector by sector, and it has had to accept three times as many EU migrants per capita as the UK. That surely cannot be the future for Britain that the leave campaign seeks: it is literally the worst of both worlds.

Mr Nigel Evans: I am interested to know my right hon. Friend’s judgment on the character of our fellow EU countries. Is he really saying that Germany would be so vindictive and spiteful that it would cut off its nose to spite its face? According to a House of Commons Library paper, we export £43.3 billion of goods and services to Germany and it exports £70.6 billion of goods and services to us, which is a deficit of £27.3 billion. Is he really saying that Germany is so vindictive and spiteful that it would close its door to that?

Mr Hammond: I want to make two points in response to my hon. Friend. He is of course absolutely right that Britain has a substantial deficit in trade with the European Union. If all he is seeking is a free trade agreement for trade in goods—

Mr Evans: Goods and services.

Mr Hammond: I am talking about trade in goods. If that is all my hon. Friend is seeking, it would be relatively simple to negotiate, but Britain will need much more than that if we are to get a fair deal for Britain’s businesses and to protect British jobs.

I want to make another point to my hon. Friend. He is of course right that economic and business voices from across Europe would argue for a free trade deal of some description with the UK. However, the political elites would look over their shoulder at the effect of a British exit and at their political opponents in their own country, and they would be fearful that what they see as contagion might spread. They do not wish to do anything that would help us to demonstrate that Britain can succeed outside the European Union. That is a simple political fact. Everyone in the Chamber is a politician, and we all know how such a calculation works: when the chips are down, they will protect their political interests.

Emma Reynolds: Does the Foreign Secretary agree that those who advocate that we leave express a big inconsistency? On the one hand, they say, “When we are in the European Union, we can’t get anything we want”, but on the other hand, they say, “If we come out of the European Union, we will have precisely what we want”.

Mr Hammond: The hon. Lady has put her finger on it. That is what this debate will hinge on. Those who propose that we remain argue that we should stick with a proposition we know and understand, and lay on top of that the additional benefits that the Prime Minister has gained for us in the negotiation. Those who propose that we leave do not know—because they cannot know—what they are proposing to the British people. They can tell us what they would like to achieve and what they would hope to negotiate, but by definition they cannot know until afterwards and the British people cannot know until afterwards what proposition they would be voting for.

Mr Jenkin: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hammond: No. I want to move on to setting out what I see as the consequences of Britain deciding to remain.

If Britain decides to remain a member of the EU, I want it to do so with the mindset of a leader. Having renegotiated the terms of our membership and secured the protections we need against further integration, we need to be a loud voice in the EU. We need to exercise our influence as Europe’s second largest economy and the recognised leader of its reform movement. We need to stop seeing ourselves as passive victims of the EU, and start to see Britain for what it is—one of the most powerful and influential member states, and one to whom others look for leadership in keeping the EU on track as a competitive, outward-looking, free-market union that is engaged with the challenges of a globalised economy.

We can take on that role because Europe is changing. There was a time when Britain, with its sceptical approach to the European project, really was in a minority of one, but the political balance across the EU is shifting away from an unquestioning acceptance of the inevitability of “more Europe” to an engaged scepticism—a desire for the EU to focus on where it can add value, leaving the member states to get on with their own business where it cannot; and a recognition of the benefits of membership, with an increasing focus on the costs and a healthy pragmatism about the limits to what the EU can deliver. In Denmark, Finland, Poland, Hungary and other Baltic and eastern European member states, we increasingly find like-minded partners who share our vision of Europe. Even in the Netherlands, one of the founder member states, the mood has shifted sharply. In that country, there is a slogan that rather neatly sums up what I think most people in Britain think about the EU: “National where possible, Europe where necessary.” Across the continent, the population, as opposed to the political elites, has become more sceptical about the EU and more focused on the need for reform and accountability.

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): On the very point that the Foreign Secretary has just made, has he noticed that an increasing number of EU member states are looking enviously at the deal that Britain has managed to secure—I will leave the qualitative judgment to others—and seeing that this is a route that they want to take advantage of, because there is a huge appetite for reforming the European Union to ensure that it serves the people of Europe and not just the political elite?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right and that is my case: Britain can lead that reformist tendency within the European Union, which is subscribed to by
more and more member states and by the populations in even more member states where the political elites have not yet woken up to the new reality.

Let us be clear with our neighbours that although the package agreed in Brussels last week is a big enough step forward to allow us to recommend to the British people staying in the EU on these special terms, they should not for a moment imagine that a UK recommitted to EU membership will rest on its laurels. They should expect to deal with a UK that fights continuously at the head of a growing phalanx of like-minded member states to keep the EU on the track of reform and competitiveness. They should expect us to police rigorously the delivery of the promises that have been made on deregulation, the repatriation of power, eurozone fairness, single market progress and trade agreements.

The choice for Britain is simple: a leading role in a reformed EU or a leap in the dark to negotiate from a position of weakness with the 27 member states we have just snubbed; driving the expansion of the single market and EU trade agreements from within or watching from outside as the rules of the market are shaped by the interests of others.

The special status that Britain has on offer means that we can have the best of both worlds. We can be in the parts of Europe that work for us and permanently out of those that do not. We can influence the decisions that affect us, shape the world’s largest market and co-operate to keep Britain safe, strong and better off, with the status of our pound and the Bank of England guaranteed and our exclusion from eurozone bail-outs confirmed. We will be out of the passport-free Schengen area and permanently protected from further steps of integration towards a European superstate, and new commitments will be made and mechanisms established to reduce burdens on business and return powers to member states. Of course there is more to do, but as we move towards the referendum, this Government have no doubt that on these terms, the United Kingdom is safer, stronger and better off inside a reformed European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The House has tested the Foreign Secretary with a great many interventions this afternoon, and he has been patient and courteous in answering them fully, but it has taken considerable time. I warn hon. Members who have in their heads or in their hands long speeches that they intend to deliver that I will have to impose a time limit on Back-Bench speeches of nine minutes later in the day.

1.4 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Almost 41 years ago, this House debated the terms of a renegotiation of our place in Europe prior to a referendum of the British people. On 7 April 1975, this is what the opening speaker in that debate said:

"for many hon. Members, as for millions outside the House, the issue is not limited to an assessment of the outcome of the renegotiations. Many...have already made up their minds...There will be a substantial body of opinion...who believe...that Britain should be in the Community for the greater economic good of Britain in a changing world...Equally there is a substantial body of opinion which is fundamentally opposed to British membership and which holds that no possible renegotiations could have changed the nature of the Community sufficiently to enable it to support British participation."—[Official Report, 7 April 1975; Vol. 889, c. 821.]

Those were the words of the Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, who, incidentally, gave the British people a decision about their place in Europe. Those words remind us that some things never change, although then it was the Labour party that was split over our place in Europe and the Conservatives who were united, whereas now there has been a complete reversal of roles. History is repeating itself in mirror image.

Sir Edward Leigh: As we are talking about history, can we at least agree that the right hon. Gentleman’s late, lamented and great father and Enoch Powell were right during those historic debates in the early 1970s that this was a unique endeavour and that what we were signing up to in the European Communities Act 1972 was quite unlike any other treaty, because it established the supremacy of the European Court of Justice over this House? Can we at least agree that there is no halfway house—we are either under EU law or we are not? That is what this referendum is about.

Hilary Benn: Indeed, that is the case. The Labour party—not the Conservative party—decided that the British people should have their say precisely because that kind of transfer of sovereignty is a decision that should rest not with this House of Commons, but with the British people. The British people made their choice and decided by a significant margin to remain in the European Community.

I was about to mention the Prime Minister’s reception on Monday. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) is fond of describing some right hon. and hon. Members as the “desperate to be disappointed”. It is fair to say that on Monday, those people were indeed disappointed, because they were never going to be satisfied.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman gives the impression that the Labour party is completely united in its position, but that excludes the public statements of some of his colleagues that they are in favour of leaving the European Union and the many Labour organisations around the country that are already campaigning for us to pull out.

Hilary Benn: I am not sure that I will bow to the hon. Gentleman’s alleged greater knowledge of the opinion of Labour organisations up and down the country on the European Union. Labour Members of the House of Commons overwhelmingly support Britain remaining in the European Union, as we shall hear in their contributions later, and in the trade union movement there is strong support for Britain remaining, for reasons that I shall come to later. The truth is that we have changed our view, and that strengthens our argument for remaining in the European Union.

The Prime Minister was never going to come back with a deal that he did not feel able to recommend because, as we know, he did not want the referendum in
the first place and was forced to concede it only by the turmoil and disagreement on his Benches. The deal does contain some useful and important changes, some of which we called for. The red card, as the Leader of the Opposition reminded the House on Monday, was a commitment in our election manifesto. There is protection for the pound because we are not in the euro, and it was the last Labour Government that took the decision not to join the euro—and how wise a decision was that? We support reforming the sending of child benefit to children living in other European countries, and the establishment of the principle of fair contribution, namely that those coming to work in this country should pay in before they receive in-work benefits.

The choice that the British people now face will rest not on the terms of this renegotiation, but on something much bigger and more important: how will our economy and trading relationships, and our prospects for investment, be affected by taking a step into the unknown; how do we see ourselves as a country; and what is our place in the world and in Europe now and in the years ahead?

Patrick Grady: What is the Labour party’s position on whether it would be appropriate for Scotland to be taken out of the European Union against its will?

Hilary Benn: The Labour party’s position is to respect the decision that the Scottish people took in the referendum when they rejected independence. We are one United Kingdom, and the decision will be taken by the people of the United Kingdom. Labour Members are clear that we support Britain remaining a member of the European Union. We held that view before the renegotiation, and we hold it today. The European Union has brought us jobs, growth, investment and security, and I argue that it gives us influence in the world. Before exploring each of those benefits in turn, let me briefly address two essential arguments made by those Conservative Members who think that we should leave—namely, sovereignty and taking back control.

Sir Gerald Howarth: The right hon. Gentleman said that the EU has brought much in the way of prosperity and jobs, and that does apply to the United Kingdom. Sadly, however, it does not apply to other countries such as Spain, Portugal and Greece, which are also members of the EU. Why are they suffering so much unemployment and low growth, while the United Kingdom is prospering? Is the difference that we, as well as being members of the EU, are led by a Conservative Government?

Hilary Benn: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman will not tempt me to agree with him on that particular observation at all—[Hon. Members: “Go on!”] No, I will not be encouraged to do that. I will, however, make an argument about the precise way that the benefits that I have just described have been brought to us because of opportunities given to us by membership of the European Union.

On sovereignty, the original decision to join the European Union was taken by the sovereign House of Commons, and confirmed by a sovereign British people in the 1975 referendum. All treaty changes that followed, including those that introduced qualified majority voting, were agreed by Conservative and Labour Governments, and approved by the sovereign Parliament. That tells us that we have chosen as a sovereign Parliament to work with others in Europe for a purpose: to achieve things that we think benefit us and our neighbours.

The second argument is about taking back control, and for some I think this is a belief that Britain standing alone would somehow have the voice that it possessed 50 years ago. We must be honest with each other. We live in a different world to the one that gave birth to the European Coal and Steel Community after the end of the second world war. We have witnessed the end of empire, the creation of the United Nations and the European Union, the formation of NATO, the end of the cold war, and the collapse of the Berlin wall. We have lived through an era that has seen the rise of new world powers, alliances, conflicts, threats, and the blistering pace of technological change that is revolutionising our economies and shrinking the way we perceive our world. We cannot turn the clock back, and to argue that we can is to mislead ourselves and others. We can, however, use the qualities that we as a nation are blessed with to make the most of the opportunities that this new world presents to us, and that is exactly what our membership of the European Union helps us to do.

Look at the strength of London as a financial centre. Look at the openness and diversity of our society, and our talent for creativity. The UK computer and games industry—not one I am particularly familiar with—did not even exist 40 years ago, but it now generates £2 billion a year in global sales, and supports nearly 30,000 jobs. Consider the worldwide reach of the English language. All those things help to make us the fifth biggest economy in the world.

Mark Pritchard: When we think about the City of London, we often think of bankers, and unfortunately of some of the high and perhaps disproportionate banking bonuses. However, banking is a necessary part of this country’s economy. Indeed, the pensions of this country are often found in the City of London, and they affect every single person up and down the land. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that an exit from the European Union would make it more likely that banks, institutions and pension funds would go to Frankfurt rather than London?

Hilary Benn: I agree that there are real risks, and the Foreign Secretary rightly made that point in his speech. It is perfectly legitimate to point out those risks, which even the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) acknowledged in his article in The Daily Telegraph, and we should take that important consideration into account. In truth, almost half our exports go to Europe precisely because we are part of the single market, and we must think about supply chains and services. We also export all the way around the world, in part because of deals that the European Union has negotiated with other countries.

The EU either has or is negotiating trade agreements with 90% of Commonwealth countries. I have heard it argued that being in the EU prevents us from having better trading relations with other members of the Commonwealth, but that is not the case. Given that we are part of this huge market of 500 million people, why on earth would we want to exchange the certainty of...
deals that we currently have for the uncertainty of deals that we might not secure? As we have heard—the Foreign Secretary made this point forcefully—we already have good trade deals, and our only alternative examples are those such as Norway, but even the Norwegians say to us, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” I think the British people will look at that and say, “That looks like a pretty bad deal to us.”

In the late 1980s, when Mrs Thatcher was busy taking away trade union rights in this country, one reason that the British trade union movement changed its view was that it saw there was an opportunity for workers’ rights across Europe. The EU helped us to deal with some of the consequences of global change by protecting workers in every European country. Those protections include paid holidays, the right to spend more time with a new-born child through improved maternity and paternity leave, limits on working time, and better protection for agency and temporary workers. Those are striking examples of how, by working together across Europe, we can protect workers and prevent a race to the bottom.

Daniel Kawczynski: The right hon. Gentleman has campaigned for many years on behalf of Africa and trade with Africa, supporting prosperity there. What does he say about the protectionist policies of the European Union, which prohibit and make trade with Africa more difficult?

Hilary Benn: When I was International Development Secretary I argued precisely that Europe should change its policies, including the common agricultural policy. I shall say something about development a little later in my speech, because that too is a really strong argument for remaining part of the European Union.

Mr McFadden: Before my right hon. Friend moves on from the list of employment rights that are guaranteed at EU level, it is important to point out that when those who would take us out of the European Union attack EU red tape and bureaucracy, they are usually talking about precisely those rights. For example, the right to equal treatment as a part-time worker and so on—those are measures of justice in the workplace, not needless bureaucracy.

Hilary Benn: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. Indeed, when one of the Ministers who advocates Britain’s exit from the European Union was asked on television at the weekend to provide an example of red tape, he referred to health and safety. Health and safety is not red tape, a burden or regulation; it is about protecting British, German and Spanish workers when they go to work in the morning, to make sure that they can do their jobs safely and securely. If we voted to leave, we could end up with a double nightmare. Unfortunately, there would still be a Conservative Government in this country and, given past records, I am not entirely sure that I would trust them to ensure that we keep the rights we currently have.

There is an even more important reason why we should remain a member of the EU: Britain’s influence in the world is strengthened by our membership. It promotes interdependence through trade and advances our economic security, because it works to tackle conflict and other global challenges, and it helps to protect us from crime and terrorism. There is nothing patriotic about diminishing the United Kingdom’s ability to make its voice heard by other nations. Stumbling out of Europe and pulling up the drawbridge would serve only to harm our position and influence in the world.

The global economic crash of 2007-08 shook the public’s faith in the ability of Governments, regulators and institutions to protect them. What it really brought home to us is the need for more, not less, co-operation with other countries, and stronger multilateral institutions, not weaker ones. If we are going to deal with the problem of big companies that show an aversion to paying tax, Europe is a very good place to start.

We should also acknowledge that the growth in the number of member states of the EU has been a very powerful force for change for the better on our continent. The prospect of membership offered the former communist states of central and eastern Europe a really powerful incentive to meet the conditions for joining. They were creating an alliance built on the values of democracy, respect for human rights, free media, the rule of law and individual freedom. As the Foreign Secretary made clear, that also helped us to be stronger in facing up to aggression and problems around the world. There is no doubt that the sanctions agreed against Russia have had an impact. They are biting. Although the Minsk agreement has not been fully implemented—the conflict is frozen—it was precisely because Europe was united and determined that we were able to have that impact. Let us be absolutely clear: Russia would see Britain’s exit from the EU as a sign of our weakness. It would see it as a sign of European weakness at the very moment when, in the face of that threat, we need to maintain our collective strength.

Hilary Benn: [Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) wants to intervene, I will of course give way.

The deal with Iran is another really good example. Europe came together in solidarity and achieved something that many people thought would not be possible. We have heard reference to the action, through Operation Atalanta, to deal with piracy off the horn of Africa. Look at the sanctions on Burma. We are just about to see something we never thought possible: Aung San Suu Kyi’s party taking power by democratic change. Europe’s voice in saying that what the previous regime had done was not acceptable was a powerful force for good in the world.

These collective displays of solidarity remind us of the power, working with our European allies, to do good. I have to say the current problems in Syria remind us of our failure in that particular conflict.

Ves Streeting: In the event of a leave vote, there are only two possibilities: either we want to remain part of a single market and are therefore subject to pretty much exactly the same rules as we are now, in which case what is the point of the referendum; or we seek not just to realign our trading approach towards the rest of the world, but realign British foreign policy away from the democracies of western Europe and the north Atlantic to the dictatorships of the east. Surely that would not be either in our national interests or in the interests of
western liberal democracy. I cannot understand why so many Conservative Members, who expect us to go out to bat for Britain at European Council summits, somehow expect our fellow European states to do otherwise in the event of a leave vote, in which case we will be punished.

Hilary Benn: I agree completely with my hon. Friend. I have just tried to demonstrate to the House the benefit that working with our European allies in trying to be a force for good in the world has brought. I was just in the process of saying that Syria is a terrible example of the world’s collective failure. Like the Foreign Secretary, in his comments at Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on Tuesday, we hope very much that the ceasefire will be implemented and upheld. However, that really depends on Russia, hence the point that I was making earlier.

What every single one of these examples teaches us is that we need stronger, not weaker, international co-operation. At this moment in this century, it would be extraordinary folly for our country to turn its back on this vital international alliance if we wished to help shape world events. That is why Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary-General of NATO, said: “Britain is a global player and a strong EU will also make sure that NATO has a strong partner in the European Union when we are facing the same security threats”.

Sir William Cash: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: I will give way one more time, but then make progress because other Members want to speak.

Sir William Cash: On the broader foreign policy question in relation to Russia and all that, would the shadow Foreign Secretary like to comment on whether he thinks the Budapest agreement in the 1990s was a good idea?

Hilary Benn: To be perfectly honest, I am less interested in what happened in the 1990s. I am more interested in what is going to happen in 2016, which is the big decision that the British people will have to take. I argue that our national security is served by our membership of both the EU and NATO. Co-operation across Europe is essential if we are to deal with terrorist threats. The European arrest warrant is a really good example of that. The case of the failed 21 July 2005 bomber who was returned here from Rome, where he had sought to escape British justice, demonstrates the benefit of working with our allies. That is why the director of Europol, Rob Wainwright, warned recently that British exit would “make Britain’s job harder to fight crime and terrorism because it will not have the same access to very well developed European cooperation mechanisms that it currently has today”.

Richard Drax: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: No, I am going to try to bring my remarks to a close.

Underlying all those questions is the greatest challenge that the peoples and countries of the world face at the beginning of the 21st century: how do we come to terms with, and deal with, the interdependence of human beings?

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): On that point, and as it is the first time I have tried to intervene, will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Hilary Benn: Since it is the hon. Lady I will give way, and then I am going to bring my remarks to a close.

Caroline Lucas: That is incredibly kind of the right hon. Gentleman. Just before he does bring his remarks to a close, I wonder whether he agrees about the importance of the EU when it comes to the environment. That has not been mentioned yet today, rather oddly, but the cross-border nature of environmental degradation means our involvement in the EU is more important than ever on everything from clean beaches, clean air, clean seas and a clean world.

Hilary Benn: I agree absolutely with the hon. Lady. The blue flag beaches are a really good example. We will not have clean beaches in Britain if we are not dealing with sewage coming from other European countries and vice versa. I shall make a point about climate change in a moment, on which Europe is absolutely vital.

The House is only too well aware that there are 7.2 billion people in the world, with 11 billion forecast by the end of the century. If we look at what has been happening on our continent in the past few months, we see the flow of refugees and Schengen under strain. That has tested Europe’s solidarity to the limit, but let us pause for a moment and imagine what the situation would be like now if the European Union did not exist. The truth is that it does not matter whether people are moving across the globe to flee persecution for a better life or to flee climate change. We are still going to have to deal with the consequences. We have not just a moral interest in dealing with climate change, poverty and conflict; we have a practical interest in doing so. From my experience as a Cabinet Minister, I can say that the fact that European countries came together in the run-up to Gleneagles and said, “This is what we are prepared to commit to” helped to unlock commitments on more aid and debt relief for the developing world. The fact that Europe went to climate change summit after climate change summit with a commitment it was prepared to put on the table, in the end, helped to unlock the deal in the Paris.

The final argument, which was the founding argument of the European project, is the fact that it has brought peace to a continent that for hundreds of years was scarred by war. Anyone who has walked along the rows of graves from the first and second world wars—what I would describe as the flower of two generations of Europeans—will see that some bear names and show how young they were. On other graves, there is no name at all. The gravestone simply reads, “A soldier of the Great War. Known unto God”. Nobody knew whose father, uncle, nephew or brother lay beneath those immaculately tended graves.

The one disagreement I have with the Foreign Secretary was when he said he felt no passion for Europe. I think we should be passionate about the greatest achievement of the European project, which was that by bringing nations together, originally through coal and steel, we would make future war, in the words of the Schuman declaration, “not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.”
The British people have to make a choice between the fear that we have somehow lost our identity, our influence and our place in the world because we are part of the European Union, and our experience that being in Europe has actually amplified, extended and increased Britain’s voice in the world, through which process the British people have benefited economically.

I have changed my views since 1975. I have been on a journey, and the party of which I am proud to be a member has been on a journey. We live in a changing world and if we look at that world, we see that the case for Europe is stronger now than ever. The story of Britain over the last century is one of a nation that has been at the heart of world affairs. It is the story of a country that has been at its best when we have been outward looking and confident. In the 20th century, we helped to build the institutions that have given us the chance to make progress: the UN, NATO and the EU. In the 21st century, we cannot reduce our influence—we cannot shut the curtains, close the door and hope that the rest of the world will go away.

This choice is ultimately about whether we face the future with optimism, or not. I believe that Britain’s national interest is best served by remaining part of the European Union, and I hope that the British people will come to that decision, too. It is now their choice.

1.31 pm

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Let me first congratulate the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on their speeches. I warmly congratulate the Prime Minister and his negotiating team on their courage and tenacity. I include especially my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe, who had to bear much of the heat and burden of the day. This was a remarkable achievement, and I wish it well. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central said, it is now for the British people to have their say, and have their say they will.

This is the 70th anniversary year of Churchill’s speech on the cause of a united Europe at Zurich on 19 September 1946. It has always struck me as ironic that that speech has been claimed by both sides of the European argument as being some sort of holy grail. I am daily on the receiving end of some vile emails and whatnot from people telling me that I am a traitor to my grandfather’s memory.

Mr Baker: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. May I say that although I disagree with him profoundly on this issue, I regard him with the utmost respect? He has held these views for a very long time with complete sincerity, and people disgrace themselves by their insults.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend.

Of course, Churchill’s was a speech of great prescience and great vision. It was also a speech of the most profound analysis. Unlike most other hon. Members, I would like to reflect at a little more distance on Britain’s experience of the European Union and, in particular, my party’s long-standing commitment to the European cause.

It is worth the House reflecting for a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, on the tragedy of what Europe must have looked like in 1945. It is only the winking of an eye in terms of time and history. It was only 71 years ago that the Germans surrendered to the allies and signed the instrument of surrender. It was only 70 years ago that the Russians drew down the iron curtain on a broken and suffering eastern Europe. Behind that line, in the wicked grip of a ruthless regime, lay all the great capitals and states of eastern Europe—Warsaw, Prague, Berlin, Bucharest and Sofia.

Most of the rest of continental Europe lay shattered and broken, after six years of war, for the second time in 25 years. There remained a vast mass of bewildered human beings, who gazed forlornly at the wreckage of their homes, their nations, their lives, their families, their possessions and everything that they loved. But from that awful scene of desolation, sadness, ruin and despair a little over 70 years ago, something truly remarkable has been achieved, which has brought freedom, security and prosperity way beyond the dreams that anyone alive at the time could ever have contemplated.

Not only have the sovereign states of Europe risen, phoenix-like, from the ashes of two world wars, but they have created of their own free will a European Union of 28 members comprising the biggest and most powerful single market in the world—one of 500 million people—in which we travel with our fellow Europeans in prosperity and peace in an era of constantly expanding co-operation, prosperity, security, safety and freedom.

When the cold war ended and the Berlin wall came down on that glorious, cold 9 November 1989, the Warsaw pact collapsed into dust without a shot being fired. Most of the eastern European countries joined the European Union, and most of them also joined NATO. Indeed, only six countries that are members of the European Union are not members of NATO.

Why did they join? They did so because the Europe and the NATO that they joined were and are prosperous, secure and free, and they wanted as soon as they could to find shelter in the institutions that had benefited from a period of peace, stability, freedom and security unprecedented in 1,000 years of European history. They hoped that it would protect them from a still predatory Russia. There is no argument but that the EU was absolutely central to those developments, and it is a very great credit to our country that we should have played such a leading role in seeing all this through.

The European Union has achieved a very great deal, but it cannot and it must not allow itself any self-congratulation in these very difficult times. Although we can see that the ice has melted on the landscape of the second half of the last century, and that power in all its forms has shifted and is shifting rapidly and unpredictably, we know how inadequately most of the institutions of the European Union have coped. This must be remedied.

As we look across Europe at all the achievements it has to its name, the pervasive mood is one of insecurity, lack of confidence and lack of optimism. Those characteristics are not found only in Europe. The troubles of Governments everywhere speak to the anxieties of
their electorates and, sadly, to the mistrust in their politicians, their institutions and their leaders. The public across Europe know only too well that the world of easy answers, instant solutions and declaratory statements is a construct of fools, politicians and the media. As power shifts so rapidly and unpredictably, one might almost believe that we are today at the start of a new history.

Nowhere are these difficulties, insecurities and lack of understanding more obvious than in this country of ours. I am always wary of trying to work out what Churchill might have thought today, because I think it is an impertinence to do so. The one thing I absolutely know is that as the world has grown bigger for Britain, the opportunities greater, the chances more glittering for our commerce and our people, so the people who practise politics and government in this country, and especially those who write about it, have a sadly cramped and limited view of Europe and the rest of the world.

In this campaign, one of our most important tasks—all of us, whatever side we are on—is to remind our fellow citizens that we share a region, a climate, much of our history and demography, our economic space and our culture with the countries of the European Union, something that Churchill pointed out very clearly in his Zurich speech. Our business corporations, our leisure time, our intellectual and cultural life are all intertwined with Europe's. We face shared problems in endless comparable ways. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) rightly mentioned all the environmental issues on which Europe has been extremely effective.

However, our political and deeply shallow media do not engage with any of that, or, as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central pointed out, with the interests—vital to us—of our European partners, allies and friends. At least, that was the position until very recently. Now the media have finally woken up, like the great, slack monster they are, to the awesome prospect of combat, newspaper sales and competition as each side of the argument tries to persuade our fellow citizens of the right way.

I rejoice at the Prime Minister’s extraordinary achievement in Brussels, and I commit myself to making the same case to the best of my ability whenever I have an opportunity to do so. I am struck by the scale of support for the European Union from British commerce and businesses both large and small, and especially—in an important letter, published in The Daily Telegraph yesterday—from four former Chiefs of the Defence Staff and other former service chiefs, who drew attention to the great importance of the EU in the security sphere.

I believe that the case to remain is overwhelming on all fronts, but there is no point in pretending that the European Union does not face many major challenges that it has to find a better and more effective way of resolving. The refugee crisis, for example, has made the EU look deeply ineffective and purely reactive. It is clear that Schengen cannot survive without the most dramatic reform, and that the external borders of Europe need to be strengthened rapidly. None of us can feel happy that the European Union, which has brought such great stability to much of the European continent, now appears to be weak and uncertain. Its unpopularity matters, and it is damaging.

My hope is that our Government will seize the moment, and that, having rediscovered the great value of extremely energetic and skilled diplomacy, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Minister for Europe and others will really push ahead in the EU to drive—along with like-minded colleagues and friends—the big reforms that Europe must swallow. They will find willing friends who want to do the same. There is a huge agenda in which Britain can and will play a leading role. On economic reform, on security, on energy, on defence and on foreign policy, there are practical and radical steps that can be taken.

May I finally indulge myself, Madam Deputy Speaker, by recalling the end of Churchill’s great speech to the Congress of Europe in The Hague in 1948, remembering that the founding fathers of Europe, with a noble vision, built this astonishing edifice on firm and very lasting foundations? This is what Churchill said at that conference:

“A high and a solemn responsibility rests upon us here this afternoon in this Congress of a Europe striving to be reborn. If we allow ourselves to be rent and disordered by pettiness and small disputes, if we fall in clarity of view or courage in action, a priceless occasion may be cast away for ever. But if we all pull together and pool the luck and the comradeship—and we shall need all the comradeship and not a little luck...and firmly grasp the larger hopes of humanity, then it may be that we shall move into a happier sunlit age, when all the little children who are now growing up in this tortured world may find themselves not the victors nor the vanquished in the fleeting triumphs of one country over another in the bloody turmoil of...war, but the heirs of all the treasures of the past and the masters of all the science, the abundance and the glories of the future.”

Those of us who fight the good fight to remain will do so with confidence, but also with humility and profound respect for those who hold long-standing views that are very different from ours, and in the sure knowledge that this issue is about the fundamental place in the world, for a generation to come, of a confident, open, engaged, pro-European Great Britain. Faites courage!

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), who is, of course, not subject to a time limit, I must warn Members that Back-Bench speeches will be limited to nine minutes.

1.45 pm

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames). I have not always found myself in such agreement with him over the years for which we have been in this place—if I remember correctly, we were elected on the same day back in 1987—but I am delighted to follow him today, not just because we are going to be on the same side in this referendum campaign, which may be another first, but because of the nature of the argument that he pursued in his speech. I am convinced that, from the “in” point of view, the argument must be presented at that level. It must be about the big issues, the things that really matter, if we are to get people out of their homes and into the polling stations to vote for continued membership of the European Union.

Perhaps I should not tempt my luck, but I hope that the right hon. Gentleman’s “homage” to his grandfather’s achievements might spread to one of the other institutions
in which he exerted a substantial influence: the Council of Europe—along with the European convention and the Strasbourg Court—in which 47 countries have been brought together in the cause of human rights. That was one of the achievements of Winston Churchill, and, indeed, the Scottish lawyer David Maxwell Fyfe. I trust and believe that we can count on the right hon. Gentleman's support when that battle is waged in the not too distant future.

I mentioned the level of the right hon. Gentleman's speech. Let me appeal to the Foreign Secretary and, through him, the Prime Minister. As I tried to explain earlier this week, when we look at the politics, we see that it is inevitable—numerically, arithmetically—that if the case for Europe is to be won, the bulk of the votes that will win it must come from the Labour party, the Scottish National party, the Green party and Plaid Cymru. I would have included the Liberal Democrats, but, although they are the most pro-European party, as they constantly remind us, they seem today to have deserted the cause—momentarily, I hope.

The reason for that is simple. In last year's general election, the Conservative party achieved 37% of the vote. Even if the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are successful in carrying a majority of that vote into the "in" camp in the coming referendum, as I hope they will "in" will represent roughly 20% of the electorate. To win a referendum, as I know only too well, it is necessary to achieve not 37% or 45%, but more than 50%. Arithmetically, the bulk of that winning vote—as I hope it will be—will come from people who voted for Labour, the SNP, the Green party and Plaid Cymru, on the progressive side of politics; and that affects the way in which arguments must be presented.

I say this with great respect to the Foreign Secretary. I know that Tory Ministers arguing a pro-European cause are like a wagon train surrounded by hostiles, and that they therefore have to pitch a certain type of argument. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) observed that the Foreign Secretary had begun his speech by using the language of scepticism and suspicion to show that he was still a Eurosceptic at heart, despite his conversion to the "in" cause. An argument of that kind may be useful in fending off the hostiles, but it will not necessarily grip the attention of the bulk of voters who have to be convinced by the European argument. For the Labour party and ourselves, the achievements of social Europe are hugely important—the achievements that have come and those that still could be. For the Green party, ourselves and the Labour party, environmental issues are of huge moment. These are things that have to be decided—even more decided now—on that continental scale. On the arguments on refugees, those of us on the progressive side of politics want to see the country do more in terms of solidarity with the refugee crisis that has beset Europe, in addition to being positive and confident about Europe's achievements—the peace that the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex spoke about; the prosperity of the single market; the achievements on workers' rights which converted so many on the progressive side of politics in the '80s and '90s to the European cause. This argument cannot be presented as if it was just about the largest faction in the Conservative party; it has to be presented to command majority support across the country.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making an eloquent speech, as ever, but may I ask a simple question: does he think left of centre voters across the UK and in Scotland really support a political construct that has inflicted penury on millions of people in southern Europe in pursuit of a discredited monetary policy driven essentially by Germany? Is he proud of that; is that socially progressive?

Alex Salmond: The hon. Gentleman allows me to say it is exactly the sort of area we want to debate, because we want to see a Europe that builds recovery, not, as he puts it, that enforces penury. That is exactly the sort of argument for why we want to change the focus of Europe in terms of how it achieves things.

Sir William Cash rose—

Alex Salmond: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I shall certainly give way to him slightly later.

I wanted to reflect on one point where I have particular experience and I think a bit of honesty is called for. I was the First Minister who lost a referendum and then resigned the next day. I did that because I do not think it is credible for a First Minister or Prime Minister to continue in office in these circumstances. I do not believe the Prime Minister—and I do not think probably the majority of his party and certainly of the country believes him—when he says he would sail on in office with a negative vote, to negotiate out of the EU, after telling people it was essential to the security and prosperity of the country, as he put it last week, for us to be in it.

There is evidence to suggest the Prime Minister has form on these matters. On 17 September 2014 he said in a statement that the question in the Scottish referendum was not about his future, but was about the future of Scotland and that he would continue regardless of the result, but by 28 September—11 days later—he confided to Scotland on Sunday the following: "If the vote had been for Scotland to have left the UK, I genuinely would have been heartbroken. I would have felt wounded and wounded. Emotionally, one would have thought, 'I'm so saddened by this. I find it difficult to go on.'"

By “difficult to go on” I think he meant in office rather than anything more substantial.

That attitude has been confirmed by a number of sources since. I suspect that the idea that a Prime Minister could continue in office having lost such a vote is, to coin a phrase, "for the birds", which is exactly why the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister, as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is right in one bit of his apparent calculation: that an opening would allow a new Prime Minister; the second half of that probably is "for the birds", but at least in the first half about a vacancy being available the hon. Gentleman's calculation may be right. I think the Prime Minister should own up, because I think his current position lacks some degree of credibility.

The nature of this debate is already having big impacts on politics. Earlier this week, while people in this place were understandably fixed on the contest between the
hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip and the Prime Minister in the European debate, there was the settlement of the Scottish financial position. Huge tribute should be paid to the First Minister of Scotland and the Deputy First Minister, and indeed to those on all sides of the negotiating team, on bringing that settlement about. But I wondered about the rapid change in position that was taking place, where only a couple of weeks ago the Treasury position was to arrange a £7 billion reduction from Scotland’s finances, which became last week £3.5 billion, £2.5 billion earlier this week, and then ended up at zero by Tuesday afternoon. I am prepared to suggest that one reason why that change of heart may well have come about is that if it had not come about—[Interruption.] The Foreign Secretary says there was no change: believe me, the dogs in the street in Scotland know there was a substantial change over the last few weeks, and one reason why it may have come about, I suspect, is that if the Prime Minister was in the position of not being able to deliver his pre-referendum promises or vows to Scotland, he would perhaps find it difficult to sustain the argument that 27 other European leaders might be delivering their pre-referendum vows to him. We are already seeing aspects of this debate having a very substantial influence on politics.

I asked the Foreign Secretary earlier about the circumstances that would arise if the vote went for out and when article 50 would be invoked, and I have been reading the Library paper in preparation on exactly that issue. The Library paper suggests that the likely formulation would be that there would be a vote in this Chamber before the Government invoked the position, but the Government could say it was an Executive decision and just go ahead anyway. What it then goes on to argue is of great importance.

Mr Philip Hammond: I wish to clarify something. I answered the right hon. Gentleman on this point earlier, but I have taken advice since. It is the Government’s position that if the electorate give a clear decision in this referendum to leave, the Government will proceed to serve an article 50 notice; there will be no need for a further process in this House.

Alex Salmond: The Foreign Secretary says now, “No debate, no decision in the House”—right, fine. And I think that could be defended on the basis that it would be a brave person who took the position that the electorate had voted in a referendum and would attempt to gainsay it. But what I was going on to say to the Foreign Secretary is that perhaps he should pay some attention to what is in the Library paper, which goes on to put the position of what might be happening in the devolved legislatures. It says:

“As noted above, the competences of devolved legislatures and executives are circumscribed by EU law, and some positive responsibilities are placed upon the executives to implement that law. An argument could be made that the removal of these features on leaving the EU would prima facie alter devolved competence, and, insofar as it involved UK legislation, would require legislative consent from the devolved legislatures under the Sewel Convention.”

Emma Reynolds: I would be interested to know what case the right hon. Gentleman’s party will make in Scotland in favour of our membership of the EU; which does he think are the most powerful arguments that he will be deploying in this campaign?

Alex Salmond: They are the ones I made at the start of my speech in suggesting that the debate should be focused on the importance of Europe in terms of social policy, the environment, why we should have solidarity in terms of refugees, and the achievements of Europe in keeping the peace in Europe, ensuring prosperity and workers’ rights. These are the arguments we are going to focus on.

It is important to pursue the end of my current point, however. The Foreign Secretary has just said no further process or vote in this Parliament would be necessary for the Government to invoke article 50, because what Parliament would gainsay a referendum vote across the UK? But in the possible circumstance that Scotland has just voted in favour while the UK has voted against, what self-respecting Scottish Parliament, having a vote, as is indicated through the Sewel convention procedure, would not vote in the way the Scottish people had voted in such a referendum, by exactly the same argument?

Mr Jenkin: Even if Scotland were to vote to leave the EU, the case the right hon. Gentleman is making for proper consultation and a proper constitutional process would be just as powerful. Does he agree that whatever the outcome of the referendum, the Government remain answerable to Parliament and they should not proceed to any precipitate or even self-harming action, which a precipitate move to article 50 might be, unless they have consulted Parliament and gained its consent for the next steps? In my view, that might require some discussion with all our European partners and consultation with other parts of the United Kingdom.

Alex Salmond: I was pointing out that if the Government’s position that such a process would not be necessary because there had been a referendum vote, where does that leave the Scottish Parliament, if, under the conventions I have cited from the Library document, it was to have a parliamentary vote, having had a positive popular vote—a yes, an “in” vote—for Europe, using exactly the same argument as the Foreign Secretary now deploys to announce the democratic short-circuiting of parliamentary convention? The Foreign Secretary should think through the implications of this argument.

Someone else has thought through those implications. This is another first for me as having agreed with the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) for the first time in 30 years, more or less, I now find myself agreeing with the former Prime Minister Tony Blair for just about the first time—certainly for the first time in the past 10 to 15 years. He made the following comment in a French radio interview—we hope the translation is good:

“In my opinion…if the United Kingdom votes to leave Europe, Scotland will vote to leave the United Kingdom.”

As I say, for once I think the former Prime Minister has put his finger on the heart of it.

The First Minister of Scotland has also alluded to these possibilities and she is well justified in doing so, because during the referendum campaign of 2014 one of the arguments made by the no side was that we would jeopardise our position in the European Union if Scotland voted yes. That sounds ironic now, given the process we are going through, but none the less that was one of the key arguments. Secondly, she is justified because during last year’s general election, she described
exactly these circumstances as being a change in material circumstances which would justify another referendum and she then received a mandate of 56 out of the 59 seats in the House of Commons from Scotland. When the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), from the Labour Benches, says that we will vote as one United Kingdom and dismisses this point as if it was of very little consequence, he should remember that it is exactly that attitude which resulted in the Labour party not only being part of one United Kingdom, but having only one Member from Scotland to represent it in that United Kingdom.

The arguments I have made about Scotland could also be applied to Wales. Certainly, the Welsh opinion polls show a much less clearcut position on the European issue. This Library note also points out that in 2011 the people of Wales voted in a referendum massively for part of a referendum settlement that included the instruction that members of the Welsh Executive were to be compliant with EU law. They already have a pre-existing referendum mandate which could embrace parts of the European cause.

In summary, I would say two things to the Government in this campaign. First, they should recognise that in order to build an “in” majority, which is the objective, there will have to be a great deal more reflection and emphasis on the arguments that are likely to inspire support from a range of political opinion, as opposed to arguments that will fend off the remaining Eurosceptics who have decided to vote no. Secondly, in particular, the Government should have a great deal more sensitivity to that range of arguments than has been displayed thus far. In the space of the past week, since the referendum was announced, the Prime Minister has disregarded the Leader of the Opposition, and the views of the First Ministers of Wales and Scotland on the timing of the referendum. That is not an auspicious start in having the sort of broad campaign that can result in victory.

Mr Nigel Evans: I find it interesting—fascinating, almost—that the right hon. Gentleman wants to have a veto for Scotland over Brexit yet is very happy for Scotland to be part of a European Union where we have qualified majority voting and the vote can go against our interests time and time again. That really does happen, so how can he marry the two?

Alex Salmond: I can do it in a number of ways, one of which I shall now describe. Independent countries in Europe that are outside the euro area control 99% of their taxation base—everything except the VAT contribution. The figure for Scotland within the United Kingdom will be 25%, even after—if it is implemented—this week’s settlement. I regard 25% control of the tax base as not being independence in any meaningful sense, whereas I regard 99% control as meaningful independence and therefore worth the sacrifice in sovereignty that is inevitably made to achieve objectives such as peace, environmental protection and having solidarity when we face a continental crisis. That, in essence, is the difference between a country being independent in the European Union and being a devolved entity within this United Kingdom.

I hope that the arguments we put forward in this campaign will reflect the complexities of the coalition which is going to be required and which will have to extend far beyond the ranks of the Conservative party. If we are to have a resounding in majority come June and the referendum.

2.6 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), because both of them have sought and achieved a level of debate that this subject certainly deserves. I wish to say something to my right hon. Friend, and I am sure he would agree with me on this. As he knows, I have utter admiration for his grandfather, being one who was born on 10 May 1940, when he assumed the prime ministership of this country and when Hitler invaded Holland and France. However, many of Sir Winston Churchill’s pronouncements on the issue of Europe changed as time progressed. In particular, he said at one point, much later than 1948, that we should be “associated but not absorbed”. The movements that were taking place and which were apparent to Sir Anthony Eden and to others in the late 1940s and early 1950s did have a significant impact on the thinking of our great, great former Prime Minister Sir Winston himself. In saying that we should be associated but not absorbed, he had understood that there were movements afoot that were not in the interests of the United Kingdom.

Sir Winston also said that we should tell the truth to the British people. He went on to make it clear that what he meant by that was that the British people will follow you if you tell them that truth. Sadly, I believe that what has been happening in the recent months, and in the whole of this debate, is just as I indicated in my response to the Prime Minister’s statement on 3 February, when I said that he was bypassing not only his promises, but his principles. I also said that I thought there was a problem with this expression “legally binding and irreversible” and with the stitch-up, as I put it, with respect to the political decision that I anticipated would be taken in a few days’ time and which of course was taken on 10 February. I thought this expression “legally binding and irreversible” would lead on 23 June, which has turned out to be the referendum date, to something on which the voters would not be able to rely. It is strong words to say that I believe the voter is already being cheated in this respect.

I say that for this reason, and with prudence and with care: right at the heart of this is voters’ trust. I also said that on 3 February. The truth is that, for all the arguments that have developed over these words “legally binding and irreversible”, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary very carefully avoided using the word “irreversible”. He mentioned “legally binding”. Indeed, the conclusions to the summit on 17 to 18 February specifically referred to “legally binding” and specifically did not refer to the word “irreversible”. There is a good reason for that, as we have said on numerous occasions in the European Scrutiny Committee. We have said it in our reports recently and in our cross-examination of the Foreign Secretary the other day. This is all about voter trust.
Let us take as an example the removal of the words “ever-closer union” in respect of the United Kingdom. As I had to point out to the Foreign Secretary, that is not in the preamble; it is in article 1 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Therefore, any removal requires treaty change, but we are not being given treaty change. We are relying on an international agreement. I will not say that such an agreement does not have a certain legal character, but it does not bind the European Court of Justice. It does not guarantee that other member states may veto any treaty change that might follow. It also does not guarantee what the European Court of Justice may say about it. It does not take into account the fact that other states will be holding referendums on this subject, of which Ireland is one such example, the outcome of which cannot possibly be predicted—not as said by a Member of Parliament on the “Today” programme yesterday.

Sir William Cash: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, I made that very point on 3 February in my response to the Prime Minister’s statement. The Prime Minister also said that our democracy in our Westminster Parliament was the root of our freedom of choice—that was the essence of what he was saying. I also have fears about the framework of this agreement and the developments by successive Governments in successive treaties. For example, I voted yes in 1975. While I pursued the Government and harried them over the Maastricht rebellion, the situation changed dramatically when the Maastricht treaty was brought into being.

Alex Salmond: I now that some of the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues are less surprised than I am, but am I right in hearing that he voted yes in 1975? What measure of responsibility does he take for all that has happened since?

Sir William Cash: Very little. As I have said, these were decisions that were taken in 1972 on the basis of a White Paper, which said that we would always retain a veto. That is the difference. In fact, it has been whittled away by successive Governments and I have opposed them from the moment that I saw the Maastricht treaty to the present day, as the right hon. Gentleman knows only too well.

I want to go back to this problem of voter trust. The current Eurobarometer poll suggests a minus 60 factor in trust throughout the whole of Europe. Only 43% turn out in the European parliamentary elections. There is no connection between the citizen and the European Union. This is not about Europe. Many of us on the Conservative Benches love Europe. As someone who has two Spanish grandsons, one Spanish granddaughter, a Greek granddaughter, a daughter born in France, and a son once married to an Italian, I simply say that we do not have to be anti-European to be pro-democracy. That is a very powerful and important point for us all to bear in mind.

I am deeply worried about this refusal to engage with this word “irreversible.” It cannot be guaranteed. It is like buying a shiny second-hand car on a post-dated cheque with a dud guarantee. That is what we are being offered on 23 June. Unless the voter knows that they are actually going to get what the Foreign Secretary described as the “whole package”, and that they can be guaranteed that it will be given and that it will come into effect, they have no reason to have any confidence in answering the question of whether to remain in Europe or to leave. That is a severe indictment, which is why I say that the Government are effectively cheating the voter on that day.

There is also the issue about the democracy of this country. We agreed in our vote in 1972, and in subsequent accession treaties and other treaties that were added into the European Communities Act 1972, that we would voluntarily accept this as a diminution of our sovereignty in the sense that it was being put through the parliamentary system. The other day, the Prime Minister referred to an illusion of sovereignty. I do not wish to elaborate on that other than to say that it is not an illusion. Sovereignty is about the right of the people to choose, in general elections, the kind of laws under which they wish to be governed. In this House of Commons, it is not illusion. It is a fact as well as being a question of jurisprudence. That is why it is so important. People fought and died—as my own father died in the last war—fighting for the right of the British people to resist tyranny. It is a great mistake to talk about sovereignty in terms of an illusion.

There is also the question of how much influence we actually have in the European Union. I could give some further description of the voting system, but much of what happens is decided in smoke-filled rooms and not by voting itself.

2.18 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Let me begin by saying that, while I have enjoyed all the speeches so far in today’s debate, I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) for a most moving speech, which I think the whole House found pleasure in hearing.

The first week of this referendum campaign has been dominated by the positioning of members of the Cabinet and the more Godly members of the Conservative party. It is of course of interest—we are in politics so we know that it is of interest—when a political party is divided. The first point that I want to make today is that, however interesting that may be, this referendum and the decision facing the country are far more important than the position of any individual politician, the share price of any individual politician, the career ambitions of any individual politician, or indeed divisions within any single political party. It is about the future of the country. The question on the ballot paper, of course, is whether we remain in or leave the European Union, but beneath that question lie layer upon layer of fundamental issues. It is to a few of those that I shall address my remarks.

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The first is the tone in which this referendum campaign is conducted. I am clearly in favour of the UK remaining in, but I want also to understand the impulse of some of those who want to take us out. I speak not principally of the leading and familiar advocates of Euroscepticism in this House, but of my constituents and many of the constituents of other Members who have concerns about this. It is important for those of us who want the UK to remain in to acknowledge the sense of loss about the changes wrought by globalisation that have made many people feel that they do not have a stake in the country's story. It is important to acknowledge with respect that sense of loss.

Another issue underlying the question on the ballot paper is our economic and trading position. I will not go through the statistics, but we are part of a single market of 500 million people. It is the main destination for our exports. That is a big reason why as a country we are successful in attracting inward investment from both inside and outside the European Union. I believe in a UK economy that champions the activity of making things, as well as our great services. Let us consider one product, for example—a Ford car. These days such a car is likely to have its engine made here in the UK, but the rest of the car made elsewhere in the European Union—one product that contains both imports and exports. This is how modern manufacturing works. It is a supply chain and a product brought together across different borders in the European Union, with no tariffs, according to a single set of rules.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I am pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has brought up the issue of trade. Given that the economic powerhouse, Iceland, has managed to negotiate a free trade deal with the world's second largest economy, does he not share my confidence in Great Britain's ability to negotiate free trade deals with growing economies around the world?

Mr McFadden: I have looked at some of the trade agreements negotiated between individual countries and China, and I recommend that the hon. Gentleman does too. Those trade agreements often allow complete and free access for the Chinese end of the operation, with severely limited and tariff-imposed access for the smaller country, so I disagree with the view that we should have a choice between trading with the rest of the world and trading with the EU. We should do both.

Sir William Cash: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr McFadden: Given the time limit, I shall make progress, if I may.

Another issue underlying the question on the ballot paper, and to which my right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary referred, is that of employment rights. The EU is not just a trading relationship or a market. There is a social Europe aspect. Six million workers in the UK have gained new or enhanced rights to paid holidays. Around 400,000 part-time workers, most of them women and many of them low-paid, gained improved pay and conditions when equal treatment rights were introduced. I repeat the point I made in my question to my right hon. Friend. When people attack red tape and bureaucracy from the EU, it is very often those things that they mean—the right to decency at work. As my right hon. Friend said, parents' right to enjoy time with their newborn baby is not needless bureaucracy. This is part of a decent, civilised economy. That, too, is on the ballot paper when the issue is debated.

Then I come to the question raised most eloquently by the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex—the question of security. I will not repeat in a less eloquent manner the argument that he made. We ignore at our peril the achievements of peace that the European Union has helped to guarantee. This is an argument not just of interests, but of values. We should not underestimate the importance of resolving conflicts peacefully and of common commitments to democracy, human rights and respect for one another's borders. Compare those with the way that conflicts in Europe were resolved before the European Union was in place. Of course, the European Union is not perfect. I have served on the Council of Ministers and the patience even of a pro-European like me can be tested by several hours in the Social Affairs Council, with the headphones on, but I always stopped to check myself and say however frustrating this might be, compared with the way that decisions were reached or conflicts used to be resolved in Europe, it is a great improvement.

On security, we have to ask ourselves who outside the European Union would be pleased to see a British exit or pleased to see a wider break-up of the European Union. The answer most clearly is President Putin. No one would be more pleased than him to see our security compromised in that way.

Mark Pritchard: The right hon. Gentleman is right to suggest who would benefit from a UK exit from the European Union. It would, of course, be Russia, but does he agree that Russia would also benefit from Scotland breaking away from the United Kingdom?

Mr McFadden: I will come to Scotland shortly. I want to quote General Sir Peter Wall, the former Chief of the Army General Staff, who said on the BBC last year:

"Unlike the Cold War when things were more binary...in a modern interconnected world it's not just the defence capability that is going to be fundamental to our security. It's going to be a number of other issues too."

In today's world, security is a combination of hard power and soft power, so when we speak of security in the European Union, we are not talking about a European army. We are talking about the values associated with being a member. Anyone who doubts their importance should talk to the members that live close to Russia's border. They will confirm that being part of the EU is important to their security.

The hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) asked me about Scotland. As we have heard already in the debate today and in comments in recent days, the integrity of the United Kingdom is also on the ballot paper when we cast our vote. That is clear. It seems to me a great pity that those who profess to be the most committed to the United Kingdom are cavalier about the future unity of the country, which is at stake through the referendum.
Whatever the actual words on the ballot paper, I believe that underlying them are fundamental issues for us. Perhaps the most important of all is what kind of country we are going to be. The easiest thing in the world is to look at some of the issues that we see on our television screens—the flow of refugees, the economic problems that have afflicted Europe in recent years—and to conclude that the best thing we could do is to walk away, pull up the drawbridge and say it is all too difficult. Though an answer that might be, I do not believe that it is leadership. In the end, this is a question of leadership, and that is why I believe the most important response to those issues is to resolve to play a full part with our partners and allies in facing up to them. That is why I want to see us remain in the European Union and to see the UK continue as an outward-looking, open, confident, engaged player in the world.

I am delighted that the Prime Minister has given the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), who made a very thoughtful contribution. In response to his comment about Britain walking away from Europe, let me say that clearly the United Kingdom will never do that, simply because of our geography. Also, we will reach out to the rest of the world. We talk about migration, and clearly we are not going to walk away from our responsibilities in that regard. As a member of the International Development Committee, I am delighted that we are now spending 0.7% of our GDP on international development, much of which is going to Syria and to help with the refugee crisis.

In many ways I feel sorry for the British electorate. I am glad that they will get a vote, because that is important from a democratic point of view—we are talking about something huge here—but at the same time they are going to have to pick out what is true and what is not. Over the next few months they will hear a lot of propaganda, and from both sides of the argument, whether from those who wish to leave the European Union, such as myself, about how wonderful it will be, and they will have to work out how much truth there is in that—I genuinely believe it—or from those who want to remain. They are using all sorts of arguments to promote their cause, including saying, “It’s going to be Armageddon the next day, if not worse.” Clearly that is not true either. As the Prime Minister said on Monday, we voted no to the Lisbon treaty, I suspect that there might have been a different project for the United Kingdom—a third way, to use Tony Blair’s favourite phrase—in a more associative relationship with the European Union, based more on trade than on the political entity that we know a number of European Union leaders want. I think that Tony Blair did this project no favours whatsoever.

I will vote to leave the European Union because I love my country, but I respect those who will vote to remain, because they love their country too; both sides believe that they are acting for the betterment of their country. My grandfather fought in the first world war and my father fought in the second world war, and they did so to give democratic rights to countries within Europe, and indeed across the rest of the world. Devolution is a keystone of British policy, bringing power closer to the people, but I believe that the leading elites of Europe might as well be from another planet. Most normal people in this country, and indeed across the rest of Europe, cannot name a single member of the Commission. We have scores of these faceless governing elites, many of them on salaries way above the Prime Minister’s.

That reminds me of this great red card that we have been told will allow us to stop legislation we do not like, so long as we join together with another 14 countries to block it. The idea was ridiculed by William Hague in this Chamber when it was first suggested. Even if the legislation we were trying to block proposed the murder of the first born, he argued, we would be unlikely to get 14 other countries to come together in the timescale that we would be given. Remember what happened—this is a measure of how influential we are in the rest of Europe—when we tried to stop Juncker becoming President. We went on a great salesmanship deal throughout the
rest of the European Union, and how many countries did we get to support us? The answer is one—Hungary—out of 27.

Mr McFadden: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has raised the Government’s failed attempt to stop Mr Juncker. That was not because the European Union is some evil organisation; it was because the Government were completely useless at finding allies. When Labour were in government, we made a similar effort to stop a candidate and we were successful. The answer is to make friends and do the job better.

Mr Evans: I think that the answer is for us to have a veto on things we do not like. That is what sovereignty is all about. When I fight a general election, I want to be able to deliver what is in my party’s manifesto. I raised earlier the issue of child benefit going to youngsters who have never set foot in the United Kingdom. One of our manifesto promises was to stop that, but now we are told that we cannot do that. That is the nub of the problem: we are putting promises in a manifesto that we cannot deliver because the European Union will not let us.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Evans: I will not, because there is no more injury time.

This is all about sovereignty. We talk about the illusion of sovereignty. Well, if anyone wants to see it, they should come to the Palace of Westminster. If we cannot deliver the promises that we put in our own manifesto because a governing elite somewhere else will not let us, that is the illusion of sovereignty here in Westminster.

Emma Reynolds: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Evans: I will not.

It is exactly the same for the abolition of VAT on sanitary towels. It should be something we decide at Westminster. It should have nothing to do with the European Union whatsoever. I believe that if my constituents vote for me and then they do not like what my party has done in government after five years, they can get rid of us so that the laws can be changed. That does not happen at the moment, and that is one of the reasons why I wish to leave the European Union. We talk about a seven-year brake. Would anybody buy a car when they had to get permission from somebody else to use the brake and when the brake was going to go after seven years? We would have to be bonkers to buy a car like that.

Trade is mentioned time and time again. Will hon. Members please read the House of Commons paper that was mentioned? It shows that the deficit in goods and services with the European Union is huge—with Germany alone, it is more than £27 billion. I assume that Mercedes will be the first to knock on Angela Merkel’s door if Britain decides to leave, and it will say, “Don’t you dare meddle with the trade agreements the United Kingdom wants with the European Union.” Of course, we are also members of the World Trade Organisation, which will give us protection. I simply do not believe that the other countries of the European Union are vindictive and spiteful and that they would want to cut their noses off to spite their faces; indeed, if they were, would these be the sort of people we wanted to associate with?

Security is mentioned time and time again, and this issue does worry me. More than 1 million people have come into the European Union over the last 12 months. It is predicted that, by 2020, 3.6 million people will have entered Germany alone. Even now, the chief of Europol estimates that 5,000 jihadists have managed to enter. At what stage will Germany give passports to the people who have arrived there, and where will those people go? Many of them will come to the United Kingdom; they will have German passports, and there will be little we can do to stop them. That worries me.

Sadly, I do not think the people of Paris—whether at Charlie Hebdo or the nightclub that was attacked—felt any safer last year because they were in the European Union. That is not security. I want us to secure our own borders. That will allow us to have the power to control who comes into the United Kingdom. As the razor wire goes up all over Europe, let us take this once-in-a-lifetime chance to take back control, put the security of our people first and put power back in the hands of the British people.

It is the British people I would like to end with. We have not had a referendum on this issue since 1975. The Foreign Secretary told us there will be no second referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only opportunity we get in my lifetime to take back control, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him. This will be the only referendum, and I believe him.

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans). Very little of what he said did I agree with, but I appreciate the way he presented it.

Like some Members around the Chamber, the hon. Gentleman will remember the late Eric Forth, who was the MP for Bromley and Chislehurst—he was a fellow Member for part of the London borough of Bromley. Very little did I agree with him politically, either, but he once said in this Chamber that when those on the two Front Benches agree with each other, we should start counting the spoons. That is a reasonable idea. However, when not just those on the two Front Benches but the leader of the third largest party agree with each other, we need to be very careful in our assessment of what is going on: they might be right, but we have to open ourselves up to the idea that they might not be. Once there is a consensus on these things, it becomes almost unforgivable to deviate from it.

I do not normally take part in European affairs debates, because they have had a tendency in the past to become almost theological in their content and in the way they are conducted. However, I want to make a few observations. I was one of a small minority of Labour Members who were always in favour of a referendum; indeed, before the last election, I joined a group called Labour for a Referendum. I was in a minority among the members of Labour for a Referendum in so far as I
did not join that group on the basis of a fixed position of wanting to get out of the European Union. However, I came to a conclusion some years ago—one Conservative Member mentioned this—that things had changed so much in the years since the last referendum that it was time the British people were consulted again on this issue. That is the only way to achieve any kind of lasting settlement.

Others in my party mistakenly resisted the idea, even though the Prime Minister brought forward a Bill in 2013 to make provision for a referendum. What happened in 2013 and what Harold Wilson did in 1975 were almost identical: 1975 was a device for trying to prevent the Labour party from splitting asunder, and 2013 served exactly the same purpose, but for the Conservative party.

Many Labour Members resisted the referendum. They said, quite rightly, that the period before it would create uncertainty. As others have said, uncertainty is bad for business— one need only look at the performance of the pound on the international exchange markets this week. I think foreign exchange traders must be somewhat nervous creatures, because the fact of the referendum has now been around for four years, and it was obvious that it would take place once the current Government won the last election. It was there for all to see that there would be a referendum sometime before the end of 2017.

Mr Jackson: I am sure the international finance community will be heartened by the hon. Gentleman’s solicitude about the operation of the international markets. On a serious point, does he agree that there is a gap in the market for the decent, patriotic, thoughtful Labour voters who are Euro sceptic and believe that our future lies outside the European Union as a global trading nation? Those people are being let down by their own Front Benchers, who are, in effect, ignoring those views.

Jim Dowd: If I have time, I shall come on to that, but I broadly agree with the hon. Gentleman’s point, because it does have validity right across the argument. As the hon. Member for Ribble Valley said, there are those who say they love their country and want to vote out and those who say they love their country and want to stay in. We have to give due regard to everybody’s position.

The other failure of leadership was not so much on the business considerations but came from those who said that the British public might come to the wrong conclusion, so the only way to protect against that was not to allow them the choice in the first place. That was a mistake. I am not saying it is the only reason the Labour party did not win the general election last year, but it would not have been an incentive for people to vote for Labour that we were standing against the referendum while the Conservatives were standing in favour of it.

Along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and the Minister for Europe, I served on the Committee on the original Wharton Bill, as it was known at the time. Everybody knows that it was not the Bill of the hon. Member for Stockton South (James Wharton) but No. 10’s Bill, and it was given to him when he drew the No. 1 position in the private Members’ Bill ballot. A very entertaining and illuminating experience it was, too. I remember the hon. Member for Stockton South standing up at the start of the proceedings and introducing the programme motion, quite properly as the promoter of the Bill, then sitting down and for the next five weeks not saying a word until we concluded our proceedings and he indulged in the usual civilities that we have at the end of every Committee stage to thank everybody for taking part.

The Minister for Europe was by far the most active person on the whole Committee, although I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East was the more convincing. The whole thing was a pantomime designed to save the Tory party from itself—or at least part of itself. The parallel I drew between Harold Wilson’s manoeuvrings in 1975 and those of the current Prime Minister works to some degree, but unfortunately Harold Wilson only kept the Labour party together for less than a decade, and then it split over this very issue.

I actually voted no in 1975. Conservative Members have been saying that they voted yes and Labour Members have been saying that we voted no, and I think for probably the same reasons—what we expected and wanted the then EEC, now the EU, to become. I am less inclined to vote no this time, although I am not entirely certain, because I have many concerns about how the EU operates. Strangely enough, I agree with the Mayor of London, the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) in this regard: I think that Britain can have a future outside the European Union. I just do not think it is the optimal future for the British people. Where I disagree entirely with him is on the risible and laughable idea that we can vote no today so that we can vote yes tomorrow. That is completely bizarre and untenable. I admire the attempt by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) to breathe life into the idea of a second vote by saying that the Government should not respond immediately to the result of a negative vote, but there will not be a second vote under any circumstances and we should have the courage to face up to that.

Mark Pritchard: My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) also wrote recently that the British people are always right, and I agree with him. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me and the Mayor of London that, whatever the result—in or out—the British people will be right, and all of us, whatever school of thought we might hold to today, need to respect that?

Jim Dowd: I would not take such an absolutist view. The British people may or may not be right—that is a matter for a higher judgment—but, as a democrat, I believe that, whatever they vote for, it is incumbent on the Government and Parliament to abide by it. If in later years we discover that it was all a great mistake, well, c’est la vie. I cannot help feeling that the calculations of the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip have more to do with the succession to the Tory leadership than with the best interests of this country or of Europe.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Dowd: No, I am in my own time now.
I do not think that the deal that the Prime Minister came back with will be the key determinant of this argument. Rather, it is going to be about people’s overall impression of the EU and of Britain’s place in Europe and its family of nations. It will also be about the merits of the rival advocates, as well as of their arguments, as we attempt to clear the fog of claim and counterclaim. We currently have the strange spectacle of the Secretary of State for Justice being in open dispute with the Attorney General over the legal status of the agreement that the Prime Minister brought back over the weekend. That argument has been rehearsed again this afternoon, and I am sure it will complicate the issue for the next four months. Incidentally, I think the British people, rightly or wrongly, will be heartily sick of the whole discussion by the time we get to 23 June.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley said that this is the first chance he has had in his life to vote on this issue. This will be my second chance, if I survive to 23 June, which I sincerely hope I do, although I am sure that view is not universally held. It is such a critical issue for the future of this nation, and for our neighbours and friends, that we have to take it seriously. We cannot let it degenerate into an argument between two groups of zealots—the loonies, fruitcakes and closet racists on the one hand, and the self-satisfied political elite of the status quo in Europe on the other.

Finally, as others have said, we should have regard to the impact that the vote will have on the whole of these islands. If there is a negative vote, it will have an impact on parts of the UK and a direct impact— I am certain it would be a negative impact— on relations with the Republic of Ireland. There are various complicated and practical reasons for that. Given all the progress we have made in recent years, that is not a risk worth taking.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the next speaker, Members have been taking full advantage of interventions and we are therefore running rather late, so I am going to have to reduce the limit to eight minutes. If Members continue to be so generous in taking interventions, I will have to reduce it further.

2.53 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am most grateful for your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd).

I beg a little indulgence for a moment. It is highly important to bring in the Northern Ireland peace process as yet another scare against voting leave in the referendum. There was an open border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland when Ireland was not a member of the European Union and we were, and perfectly reasonable arrangements will be made with the Republic of Ireland if the United Kingdom votes to leave the EU. There are participants in the peace process on both sides of the debate, and they are talking perfectly constructively together. They will not allow this to become an obstruction to peace in Northern Ireland, and nor should we talk it up, because I think that that would be irresponsible.

I want to make the point that I am not advocating a second vote. If we get a vote leave in this referendum, as I expect we will, that will do for me. The point I am making is that article 50 is a provision of the treaties that we will have just rejected. The idea that we are bound to follow the article 50 provisions after we have just rejected the treaties in their entirety seems a bit odd. Given that the treaties were created by 28 member states negotiating together, 28 member states negotiating together to rescind our membership of the European Union might be a more sensible approach. However, that should be decided by Parliament, not by the Government acting on Crown prerogative in an act of petty vengeance to scare people.

Peter Kyle: The hon. Gentleman is saying that once we say no to the EU, we will tear the whole thing up and do it all on our terms, but he expects there to be a cordial relationship afterwards while we renegotiate on terms that are favourable to us. Are not these two things completely and utterly incompatible?

Mr Jenkin: Let me put it another way to the hon. Gentleman. Is he seriously suggesting that after the British people have rejected the treaty on the functioning of the European Union and the treaty on European Union, our European partners are going to say, “You may have rejected all that, but you are bound by this”? That is ridiculous. It is absurd. It is far more likely that Parliament will want to discuss the matter; the Government will produce a proper White Paper and we will proceed in an orderly and consensual manner, not in a precipitate one. The only reason those in favour of remaining are raising this is to try to scare people. It is another scare story, and we are not having it.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge also talked about uncertainty. May I point out to him that every time we have a general election, there is a certain amount of uncertainty? My goodness, at the next general election, if there is any possibility of the Labour party being elected, boy, there will be uncertainty! There will be uncertainty in the markets, and there will be pound gyrations. Democracy is about uncertainty, but we get more uncertainty where there is no democracy: look at Greece; look at Spain; look at the eurozone. That is uncertainty, and it is the uncertainty that we want to get out of.

If we vote leave, we know what will happen. We will get our powers back. We will get control over our borders. We will be able to spend the money that we send to the European Union as we want to spend it, instead of subsidising our European competitors. Three hundred and fifty million pounds a week, or a net contribution of £10 billion a year—that is a lot of money. We will be able to pay for the roads in Scotland. We will be able to pay for universities. We will be able to pay for the investment in science and research that we need, and then some.

The real question in the debate is what happens if we vote remain. What new laws will be imposed on us after we vote remain? What judgments will the European Court of Justice visit upon us over which we have no control? What about the next treaty? We know that there will be another fiscal union treaty like the one that the Prime Minister vetoed a few years ago. The agreement states:

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functioning of the euro area and shall refrain from measures which could jeopardise the attainment of the objectives of economic and monetary union."

It sounds as though we are giving up that veto. We will not be able to veto a fiscal union treaty if we have signed this agreement, particularly if it is legally binding and irreversible. We are going to be stuffed. In whatever way that treaty affects our interests—we can even have a referendum on it—if we abide by this agreement, we will not be able to stop it. Talk about uncertainty; I think it is safer to leave.

Let me declare an interest as a director of Vote Leave. Let me also praise my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) for raising the tone of the debate and giving us an historical perspective. He underlined the fact that we are at a turning point in the history of our country. I was struck by the shadow Foreign Secretary’s reminder that more than a generation has passed since the last referendum, when his father was opposed and my father was in favour. Today, the shadow Foreign Secretary is in favour and I am opposed. I shall not speak for my father in this debate, but there has been a reversal of roles. The real question is: should the debate be about the past or the future? We do not live in the world as it was after the second world war—pre-globalisation, pre-global trade, pre-computers and the internet, pre-space age and pre so many of the scientific discoveries that affect our world today.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what he says. I have huge respect for his views, but does he not agree that we cannot make a serious judgment about the future unless we are quite clear about what went before?

Mr Jenkin: We should be ready to recognise the EU institutions our continent has inherited as so last century, but I was going on to say that we must never forget the forces of history and the tragic errors of the past that have shaped the present on our continent, although we must also have the courage to embrace the change in our society and in the world that will otherwise leave us stranded with and clinging to outdated ideas and constructs. Our main contention is exactly that; the EU is an outdated construct.

Sir William Cash: Does my hon. Friend agree that if we remain we would in effect be in the second tier of a two-tier Europe dominated by other countries?

Mr Jenkin: That is a whole new argument, which I accept, but I am not going there now.

The referendum represents not just a turning point in itself, but just one point on a trend that is increasingly paralysing our entire continent, the unity of which is being shattered by the very institution that was intended to unite it. Let us look at the eurozone and at the Schengen free travel area and the migration crisis. Whereas in 1975 my party, myself included, was enthusiastic for membership of the European Communities, today my party—and, I believe, my country—knows that the world is utterly different.

Today, the strongest arguments for remaining appear to be ones saying that we are determined not to participate in the three main purposes of the EU: we will not join the euro, we will not join the Schengen free travel area and we will not be in a political union. What is the point of our being in this arrangement when we are so opposed to its principal purposes?

I must say that we have heard a certain amount of this debate before, as the Minister for Europe will recognise. Much of it is familiar from the Maastricht debates 20 years ago. We were told that we had opt-outs, but the problem is that they do not always work. We were told that about the social chapter, but we were overruled by the European Court of Justice on the working time directive. We were told then, “Europe is changing”, and, “It’s all going our way.” I cannot believe I have heard it again, but the Foreign Secretary actually said today:

“National where possible, Europe where necessary.”

John Major regarded that—subsidarity—as his principal triumph, which was going to reverse the centralising tendencies of the European Court of Justice. We were told we would always be leading in Europe. Today, the Foreign Secretary said we would “fight” with “like-minded…states” and be “leading…in a reformed EU”.

We have heard all this before—these are the same deceits—to persuade people to support something that we do not really want. We were told that if we vetoed Maastricht, it would be a “leap in the dark”. What did the Foreign Secretary say today? He said leaving would be a “leap in the dark”. The giveaway this afternoon was when he said:

“Of course there is more to do”.

You bet! If we stay in the European Union, there is going to be a lot more to do, because this agreement is of course so inconsequential, even if it were irreversible and legally binding.

What happens if we vote to remain? That is the question the Government need to answer. What will happen? Last time, we were told before the referendum that there would be “no loss of essential national sovereignty”.

The word “essential” was useful, because it denuded that phrase of its meaning. We have the same weasel words coming from the Law Officers today.

If the British people are deceived again and we vote to remain, we will have resolved nothing. We will be back in the Chamber in five or seven years’ time either to demand another referendum or deciding just to get out. That is the trend: we will be facing the same problems and we will be afflicted by the same conflicts with our European partners, although by then the problems will be worse. I believe that leaving the European Union is the safer choice. Our security depends on NATO and our alliances, our own people and our resources, and working with allies. The idea that we can work with allies only if we stay in the European Union is yet another deceit being visited on the British people.

3.4 pm  

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), even though I do not agree with anything he said, apart perhaps from what he said about the speech by the right hon.
[Emma Reynolds]

Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), which was one of the best I have heard in this House. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said, it was a pleasure to listen to. I really feel that he raised the level of the debate.

I want to speak about patriotism. The British people are deeply patriotic. According to the recent social attitudes survey, the overwhelming majority of British people describe themselves as being proud of our country. I think that means that they want to see a strong country, a strong economy, a more secure country and a country that stands tall in the world. It is my view that there is a powerful, progressive, patriotic case for remaining in the European Union.

I believe, as do many in this House, that we are stronger, more prosperous, safer and more influential as a member of the European Union. The challenges that we face in the 21st century will not be solved by pulling up the drawbridge, and they do not stop at the white cliffs of Dover. We achieve more working together than we do alone. We have a proud history as a trading nation and a proud history of providing leadership in international and European co-operation.

We, the patriotic, progressive Euro-Americans, are the optimists about our role in the world. We believe that by working with others, we do not lose power, but assert and augment our power in the world. The anti-Europeans are the pessimists in this debate—pessimistic about what we as a country can achieve by working with others, and pessimistic in saying that we will always be the losers when we try to work with others. British Prime Ministers of different political colours have disagreed with that assumption. They have driven international co-operation and the establishment of international organisations. The great post-war Labour Government of Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin were instrumental in setting up NATO.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Emma Reynolds: In a minute.

As the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex said in his powerful contribution, his grandfather, Winston Churchill, played an incredibly important role in preserving the peace in the post-war period. Edward Heath took us into the European Economic Community. Margaret Thatcher very successfully drove the creation of the European single market. Tony Blair, somebody of whom I am very proud because he won three elections for us, successfully pushed for the enlargement of the European Union.

I do not often agree with the current Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative party, but I thought he made a very powerful case on Monday for our membership of the European Union. That powerful case goes beyond the deal that he struck. He was absolutely right when he said in his closing remarks that “this is no time to divide the west” when we face “Putin’s aggression in the east; Islamist extremism to the south.” I agree with him too that there is “strength in numbers” and that the choice in the referendum is between “an even greater Britain inside a reformed EU and a great leap into the unknown.”—[Official Report, 22 February 2016; Vol. 606, c. 25.]

Many column inches and much time on the broadcast media over the past few days have been dedicated to the divisions in the Conservative party over our membership of the European Union and to the intricacies of the deal that was struck at the longest English lunch in living memory on Friday in Brussels. However, I hope and believe that it is the bigger arguments about why it is in our interests to remain in the European Union that will, in the end, determine how people vote in the referendum on 23 June. I will make three key arguments that are at the heart of the patriotic and progressive case for our membership.

Let me take the economy. We trade more with the rest of the EU than we do with any big economy around the world, including the US, China or India. As a member of the biggest single market in the world of 300 million people, we are a gateway to the rest of that market, which is why we are able so successfully to attract inward investment from companies in the European Union and beyond.

On the outskirts of my constituency, Jaguar Land Rover has invested in a huge award-winning engine factory that, when at capacity, will employ 1,500 people. Its chief financial officer recently said that any split from the European Union would damage trade for UK business, and he cautioned against “barriers” that would arise in the event of the UK leaving the EU.

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly powerful point about the importance and interconnectedness of trade. Does she agree that the same interconnectedness applies to higher education? Universities share funding across Europe and come together in an interconnected way. By working together with research grants and research as one European Union, we share our expertise with that of others, and we solve global problems together.

Emma Reynolds: I agree with my hon. Friend, and the University of Wolverhampton and Universities UK have made that point clear. They think that there is great strength in universities across our country working together with other universities and research institutes in Europe, and they benefit from the investment and funding that we receive by being a member of the European Union.

Alongside my colleagues, as a Labour MP I will be making the social Europe case for staying in the EU. Thanks to the previous Labour Government who signed up to the social chapter—I am proud of that Government and that we took that decision—working people across the country have employment rights and protections that they would not otherwise have, such as paid annual leave, and rights for agency and part-time workers. Many of those affected are women. As the TUC general secretary Frances O’Grady recently said, those rights and protections will be on the ballot paper come 23 June. Frankly, I do not think that we can trust this Tory Government to maintain those protections if we were to leave the EU.

There is also a powerful security case for us to stay in the EU. Prior to the European arrest warrant, the French suspected a terrorist in our country of bombing
the Paris metro, and it took us 10 years to extradite that suspect. In 2005, Osman Hussain, the terrorist who attempted to bomb the London underground and fled to Rome, was extradited back to the UK in under five weeks. That tells us something about the strength of pooling resources, expertise, and sharing information about criminals who do not respect borders.

Briefly, let me touch on the weaknesses of the counter-argument. Those who want to leave the EU have a responsibility to tell us what “out” would look like, and it seems that there is a choice between on the one hand not having access to the single market with British business being hit with trade barriers and tariffs, and on the other hand having access to the single market while still paying into the EU budget and accepting the free movement of people and all the rules, but without a seat at the table. There are major inconsistencies in that argument. As I pointed out earlier, the idea that somehow we are powerless within the EU, but that if we left we could get precisely what we want on our own terms, is not believable. I hope that the patriotic progressive case for our membership will win out, and that the British people vote to remain on 23 June.

3.14 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Let me start by paying tribute to the Prime Minister—not something I have always done. He has delivered on our manifesto commitment to hold a referendum, and he is the first Conservative leader and Prime Minister to do so in more than 40 years. Even Margaret Thatcher, who I am sure all those on the Government Benches still adore, did not deliver a referendum and did not negotiate any pre-referendum reforms, bar getting the rebate back for the United Kingdom, so credit where it is due. The Prime Minister may not have obtained the impossible, but many of us think that he has obtained the improbable. He went to Brussels with demands that many people thought he would never get.

Richard Drax: On what the Prime Minister achieved, does it not strike my hon. Friend as odd that the Prime Minister gave in before he went by saying he wanted to stay in the EU even before the negotiations had started?

Mark Pritchard: It is always difficult to set out the defined and true position at the outset of any negotiations, otherwise one would not negotiate the position one would want to find oneself in at the end of it, so I do not agree with that. I think the Prime Minister achieved more than many people thought he would achieve. Of course, for some people even if he had parted the English channel it still would not have been good enough. Perhaps some even might have wanted him to fail. Overall, it is a good reform package for the United Kingdom.

I agree with the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin), in the penultimate paragraph of his remarks, suggested that security was a key issue too. It is unfortunate that the issue of scaremongering is coming into the debate. It is legitimate to talk about national security, both for those who want to remain in the European Union and those who want to leave, and it is on national security that I would like to focus my main remarks.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) wrote in the Daily Mirror this morning:

“The threats posed to the UK’s security are just like the threats posed to the rest of Europe.”

He is right. Common threats require a common response. Europe’s threats are our threats too. The UK’s threats are Europe’s threats. In an unsafe world this is not the time to be walking away from our friends and allies. This is a time to stand together. This is not the time for the United Kingdom to be quitting Europe. My view is that the UK is safer in a reformed European Union and the European Union is safer with the UK standing by its side, now with our own special status.

The Paris attacks have been mentioned a couple of times today and in the media over the past few days. Some say that it is less likely that the United Kingdom will be subject to Paris-style terror attacks if we leave. I disagree and think that is a very, very bold statement to make. Some say the Syrian refugee crisis has had an impact on terrorist incidents across Europe and will therefore have an impact on the UK. That may well be the case, and I will come on to those points in more detail later. Specifically on the nationality of those involved in the Paris attacks, however, the majority were EU nationals. In fact, they were led by a Belgian national.

Some have referenced open borders in the United Kingdom. We do not have open borders in the United Kingdom. That is inaccurate and, unfortunately, misleading. The fact is that under Schengen we do not have open borders. That is a fact.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We do effectively have open borders for Belgians. Belgian passport holders can come here without so much as a by your leave. They come through and we cannot refuse them unless we have specific evidence. If we could make them apply in advance and get clearance, as we have to before going to the United States, our borders would clearly be safer.

Mark Pritchard: First, the reference to the Belgian EU nationals was to make the point that it was not Syrian refugees who undertook that Paris attack. Secondly, my hon. Friend may not want to make this point, but I will make it for him. The majority of terrorist threats in this country, as proven by the 7/7 attacks, are actually by British nationals, not EU nationals. Of the four involved in the 7/7 attacks, three were British nationals and one was a German national. It is not necessarily the case that coming out of the European Union will make us safer from attacks. I think there is a danger from some—not Members and certainly not my hon. Friend—of a Trumpification of the out campaign. There is a danger of the shadow of Donald Trump coming into this referendum campaign, which I think would be very unhelpful and dangerous.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman that we would be deluding ourselves if we believed that by stopping people at the border, terrorism would somehow not be a threat to this country.
Mark Pritchard: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, as he so often is. Rather than increasing the threat, Europe is helping us daily to decrease the threat to our borders. Whether it be through Border Force staff in Calais and other places, through Frontex, which has helped us with some of the most recent border issues, through collaboration between European police forces and the National Crime Agency and other UK constabularies, or through the closer working relationship between our intelligence agencies, Europe helps the UK’s national security every day of every week. As I said, suggesting that leaving the European Union will keep the UK safe from terrorism is a very bold statement.

This morning, writing in The Sun, the former Foreign Secretary, the noble Lord Owen suggests:

"Remaining in the EU is risking more than leaving", but where is the evidence? There is no evidence. That is another sweeping and bold statement, but no evidence is provided. What is more, I think that an exit from the European Union would embolden the UK’s enemies. In national security terms, who would benefit from the UK quitting Europe? One word and one country—Russia. It is the UK that has ensured that Europe acted quickly and decisively to impose sanctions over Russia’s territorial grab in Ukraine. It is Europe, alongside NATO, that is sending a clear and tough message to ensure that the territorial integrity and security of the Baltic states are assured.

On diplomacy, it is so often the United Kingdom that is the bridge between continental Europe and the United States, making sure that we get the right decisions on European foreign policy. If Members will forgive me, I want to quote from what I wrote recently for The Sunday Times:

“A decision to isolate Britain from Europe will have significant national security implications. First, a British exit would end Britain’s political and diplomatic counterbalance to France and Germany’s strategic cluminess. … Second, Britain’s exit could also weaken NATO, with Germany and France extending Europe’s own defence structures and budgets, such as the European Defence Agency. In itself this is not a hostile undertaking, but soon, complementary defence could be replaced by defence competition” to NATO. Some colleagues need to think carefully about that. It continued:

“Third, a British exit would rob the EU of Britain’s diplomatic advice and counsel…Over the horizon, this new weakness would present unforeseen and new national security challenges to Britain.”

Britain has a unique place in the world, and its diplomatic voice and reach is empowered by four essential global pillars: the United Nations, NATO, the Commonwealth and the European Union.

I would also like to refer to a published letter written by a former Chief of the Defence Staff:

“Britain’s role in the EU strengthens the security we enjoy as part of Nato, adds to our capability and flexibility when it comes to defence co-operation and allows us to project greater power internationally.”

I do not think we should dismiss the voice of former Chiefs of the Defence Staff. Yes, of course the United Kingdom could survive outside the European Union. Yes, we would still be part of NATO. Yes, we would still have our own excellent armed forces. The key question, however, is whether we are safer in the European Union, or safer outside it. I would argue that we are safer in. That is also the view of our close friends and allies who share our intelligence—the “Five Eyes” nations—as well as of other nations with which we daily share intelligence, such as Germany, Denmark and so on. Let us look across the water to the US Congress, the White House, the Pentagon and the State Department. All those institutions and bodies want to see a safer Britain in the European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Because Members are still accepting the maximum number of interventions, I shall have to reduce the speaking time limit to seven minutes. If speakers continue to take interventions, the limit will have to be reduced further.

3.24 pm

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In the weeks and months to come, ahead of the referendum on membership of the European Union on 23 June, I look forward to hearing, from all parts of the House, the positive and inspiring argument for our remaining a member of the EU.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who set us off at the start of the debate with what I think George Herbert Walker Bush would call “the vision thing”. That was refreshing. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has left the Chamber, but I would say to him that, like his father, my grandfather died during the last war, in the Clydebank blitz. Neither side in this debate has a monopoly on loss or war legacy.

It is commendable, and refreshing, to see a Conservative Prime Minister stand in the Chamber and state his commitment to the European Union. However, if the Prime Minister intends to see a vote to remain delivered this summer, it is time for him to stop talking principally to his own party, and to start talking to the public in these islands. It is time for him to stop engaging only in the minutiae of his reform deal, and instead to offer a vision. As the hon. Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) said earlier, the Prime Minister has secured only gossamer-thin concessions. The grander vision is, I think, the key. It is time to celebrate what the European project has done, and can continue to do, for the United Kingdom, Europe and the world.

Patrick Grady: The Foreign Secretary said earlier that objective 1 status, which transformed the infrastructure of the highlands and islands, could be seen as bunging money to people. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is completely the wrong tone to adopt in a debate such as this, and that we need to recognise the positive contribution that the European Union has made to these islands?

John Nicolson: That was certainly not the Foreign Secretary at his most sophisticated.

This debate should not be about appeasing troublesome Eurosceptics in the Tory ranks, or about establishing who the next leader of the Conservative Party will be. It is a debate about how we in these islands see ourselves, how we see our continental neighbours, and how the rest of the world sees us. What has been achieved in Europe since the formation of the European Union and its predecessor organisations is extraordinary. A continent that was apparently intent on destroying itself for decades—indeed, centuries—as nations fought with one another has been transformed into a continent that is synonymous with peaceful co-existence between nations.
When I listen to debates about Europe in the House, I often think how much we miss elder statesmen such as Heath and Healey. They were parliamentarians with a memory of war, who could have put into context for all of us what this project was about. They could have reminded us that it was about peace in Europe, and about establishing unprecedented stability between countries that had torn themselves apart through generations of enmity. Many Conservative Members will tell the House that the European Union was established on the basis of trade and trade alone, but I think that they forget their history. The Schuman declaration, presented by the French Foreign Minister in May 1950, proposed the creation of a European Coal and Steel Community. Why? To lock the economies of Germany and France together into mutual dependency, making war impossible. That was a “first step” in the integration of Europe, and one that many at the time thought should be treasured. It was a remarkable first step.

Although the institutions and treaties have changed over the years, the principle that underpins them has remained the same. Whether it was delivering forgotten freedoms to ex-fascist countries such as Spain and Portugal, inspiring a new sense of hope and opportunity for the ex-Soviet states, or promising the seemingly impossible—the restoration of free movement across the former Yugoslavia—the dream of EU membership facilitated peace, progress and prosperity throughout the continent.

It will come as no surprise to Members to know that I want to see Scotland, one day, with a seat at the top table of the European Union as an independent member state. I want Scotland to have control of its own foreign policy and its own defence policy, to control its own taxes and resources, and to make its own welfare decisions. Like other small nations—Denmark, Finland, Ireland, and Sweden—we know that this is achievable while continuing to enjoy the benefits of a union which promotes human rights across the continent, advances social Europe, guarantees workers’ rights in so many fields, where we work together to combat terrorism and climate change, and which allows access to the world’s largest trading area.

Membership of the European Union continues to provide the peoples of Scotland with huge opportunities. The right as European citizens to live, study and work in any EU member state is not something that should be taken for granted. In 2012-13, over 1,400 students from Scottish universities were supported by the Erasmus programme to study elsewhere in the EU. Scottish companies have taken full advantage of the export markets; Scottish exports to the EU were worth £12.9 billion—some 46% of all Scottish exports—in 2013 alone.

The vision I and my colleagues on the SNP Benches have for Scotland is one in which we play a full and active role on the world stage, independent but not never insular. It was called subsidiarity by Sir John Major, a concept I think we probably believe in rather more than Sir John Major himself: devolving as much as possible, but co-operating and pooling resources whenever desirable.

The alternative vision offered by the Eurosceptics and Europhobes is a depressing one. Indeed the pessimistic vision of the Foreign Secretary is a depressing one. The prospect of retreating into ourselves, closing our borders and withdrawing from a union that has brought unprecedented peace and progress to this continent is a fate that has never, and will never, appeal to me. So let us trumpet an optimistic vision of Europe with verve and with enthusiasm and commend EU membership to the peoples of the United Kingdom with passion.

3.32 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I agree that we must understand the lessons of history and if I, for one moment, thought that leaving the EU would make civil war in Europe the remotest bit possible, I would not be standing here advocating that we do leave. How could I, when I come from a post-war generation where my parents constantly talked about the war? It was the essential fact of their life. My parents were 25 in 1945. My mother had to flee Paris hours before the German tanks rolled in. Her best friend, who was Jewish, had to throw herself off a train and was killed as she was being taken to the death camps. My father also had to flee France. This was a defining moment in their life, and it is not surprising that that generation wanted to create more of a sense of European solidarity and never repeat the slaughter and horror of two world wars. We all know that.

There was also a lack of confidence, I think, in that post-war generation. In the lifetime of my parents and my early lifetime, in just 20 years the world’s greatest empire dissolved—our empire dissolved. And there was a lack of confidence about our economy. When I had my first job and I was sitting across the river looking at the Palace of Westminster dreaming one day of becoming an MP, I was having to work a three-day week and was working by candlelight. Then when I arrived here in the 1980s we were shadowing the Deutschemark and it was felt that, again, we would find life outside the European Economic Community, as it was then, or the European Union a cold and hard place, but now we are in a different world. We are now in a new world—I will not say a brave new world, but it is a globalised world—and we have regained our confidence as the fifth largest economy in the world.

Therefore, some of these arguments are based on the past and we must certainly learn the lessons of the past, but we must realise that there is now a different future, and that the EU may have played its part but it has moved on from what we voted for in 1975. It has moved on from what was an economic community into something much more unified in that sense, and much more powerful.

Interestingly, however, so few of the people here who advocate our staying in the European Union seem to have this vision; where are the speeches today or this week, or in the country that have that vision from those who favour remaining in the EU? Where are the people arguing for a single currency? Where are the people arguing for much greater co-operation and, indeed, an ever closer union? Where are those voices in Parliament? Where are the voices of the Ted Heaths, the Barbers and all these great figures from our past?

Mark Pritchard: I am not arguing for an extension of Schengen or for a single currency, but I am arguing for us to remain in on national security grounds. Does my hon. Friend, with all his experience, agree that if the
United Kingdom were to leave the EU, the EU would be less safe and if the EU is less safe, just over the horizon, that is not in the United Kingdom’s national security interest?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a weak argument, perhaps one of the weakest that those advocating our staying in the EU believe in. I am not going to repeat all the arguments about our security ultimately depending on NATO, but I will give one example, from recent history, in order to reply to my hon. Friend. Does he think that the European Union attempting, in a rather cack-handed way, to create an association agreement with Ukraine was a good move to make? Has it made Europe a safer place? Has it not led directly—I do not approve of this—to the annexation of Crimea? An imperialist Europe is not necessarily a force for security; the force for security is the best national interests of the United Kingdom, working with our partners in NATO, and that has been the case since the second world war.

I am concerned, first, by the lack of vision on the pro-European side, which is something quite new in this House. It was certainly not the basis and foundation of debates in the 1970s, when principled cases were being made on both sides. On one side were the Benns, Foots and Powells, and on the other side were the Heaths and the Barbers. If there is not such a divide between us and if we are united in this House in not wanting to be part of an ever closer union, we do not want to be part of Schengen and we do not want to have a single currency, why are we told that Armageddon will take place the moment the people—not us but the people—vote to leave? Why do we get these apocalyptic visions of what would go wrong? Why are the Government so intent on not having a cool, calm, independent cost-benefit analysis of what would happen if we decided to leave? I suspect, having read things such as the Open Europe briefing, that the difference is marginal. Open Europe suggests that, in the best case scenario, we might gain 1.1% in gross national product, if we became a deregulated, open society and immediately concluded a free trade agreement, and that in the worst case scenario we might lose 2.2% of our GNP. It is therefore quite a narrow debate. If it is a narrow debate, can we not just raise its tone? Can we not say, “Whether we leave or stay in is probably not going to have a dramatic effect on our economy”?

In that sense, it is exciting to think that we might actually be able to run our agriculture. I represent a highly rural area. Our agriculture industry creates 3.5 million jobs, provides 62% of the food we eat and contributes £85 billion a year to the UK economy. It would be rather exciting if this House and our own Ministers ran agriculture. What about fisheries? Do we remember all the arguments made by our friend Austin Mitchell, who represented Grimsby? Do we remember what Grimsby was like, when one could walk across the harbour across the decks of all the trawlers? Do we recall what happened to our fishing industry? Do we recall that it was given away in the last two days of negotiations by Mr Heath? Perhaps it would be quite visionary and quite exciting for us to create a low-tax, deregulated economy. There is a world out there. Winston Peters, a former deputy Prime Minister of New Zealand, has openly speculated about, as he says, forgetting the terrible betrayal of 1973 and creating a new free trade agreement not just with Australia, as New Zealand is now concluding, but with us as well. There is an exciting world out there, with India, China and so on. Do people not think—

Mark Pritchard rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): No! No! Please.

Sir Edward Leigh: I will not give way, because others wish to speak. My hon. Friend has already given me extra time just by standing up. [Interruption.] I will finish my speech, because I do not wish to abuse the procedures of the House.

On a final note, there is a world out there. Let us grasp it; let us trust the people; let us not be afraid and let us regain our freedom.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We have 10 speakers and two wind-ups. It works out at six minutes each, and that is without interventions. I ask those who have spoken to think about those who have not to make sure that they also get on the record. If we can help each other, we will all get there.

3.40 pm

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): I am delighted to be able to contribute to this debate. I want to take the time allocated to talk about how I have personally benefited from being an EU citizen. My speech will not be about the big issues that some other Members have mentioned. I agree with the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) that this debate can get a bit theological, so I will try to keep it personal and talk about the points that affect me.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you may be too far away to see, but I have a scar on my chin, which I received when I was 17 or 18 while I was on a cultural visit—more commonly known as a lads’ holiday—in a southern European country. Unfortunately, halfway through the trip, I partook in one too many libations and ended up in a fight with the pavement. It is safe to say that the pavement won and I had to engage the local medical services. As I was younger than I am now, I did not have any travel insurance. However, the whole process at the hospital was made incredibly easy by the fact that I was carrying a European health insurance card in my wallet. That allowed me to be treated for free, very quickly, and I would say painlessly if they had waited for the local anaesthetic to kick in before stitching me up. I know that, compared with some issues that have been discussed today, that situation seems insignificant, but it is a practical way in which being an EU citizen has had a positive impact on my life. I am sure that it is an experience that has been shared by many other people my age.

I have been contacted by a number of young people who are slightly worried about what will happen when they leave school or are in their university holidays. They fear that a Brexit might mean that they will not have the opportunity to jet off easily to Magaluf or Zante for the aforementioned holiday. Will they have to
go through the hassle of getting visas just for a week or two of sun, sea and other things? Such issues may seem insignificant in the Chamber, but they matter to young people, especially those who have been denied a vote in this referendum.

There are 170,000 EU nationals living and working in Scotland, improving our economy, enriching our culture and even legislating in our national Parliament—the Scottish Parliament. I have personal experience of the valuable contribution of EU citizens to our society, as one even assisted me in my election campaign as my election agent. I recognise the real concerns that have been expressed to me by constituents who are EU citizens. They worry about what will happen to them, their jobs, their family and their lives should the UK leave the EU. They have also expressed their frustration that they will not be able to vote in the referendum.

A large number of my constituents are farmers, and the European common agricultural policy provides vital funding for them. It helps farmers and landowners to maintain farming and forestry in vulnerable areas and provides competitive support to enable a wide range of agri-environmental, food, rural and community activities across Scotland. In the current financial period of 2014 to 2020, Scotland will receive about £4.6 billion from Europe to implement the CAP.

Farmers depend on our membership of the EU to survive and thrive. They are not only the people who produce our food and look after our land, but the lifeblood of our rural communities. To put at risk the substantial investment that Europe makes in our farmers through the CAP would be to rip the heart right out of rural Scotland.

Many Members have spoken about where they would like to see the EU doing less, but I would like to talk about one area in which I would like to see it doing more. Again, it is a practical matter. I would like to see a single digital market where customers can buy and then use digital content across borders. Why? I want to watch Netflix abroad. If my sunbathing or sightseeing is rained off, I want to be able to sit in my hotel room and watch my favourite show, without being told by my screen that the current programme is unavailable in my location.

In my brief time, I have spoken about why the EU is important to me as an EU citizen—not big issues, not theology, but reasons based on self-interest, which I am sure will have convinced some Conservative Members.

3.45 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Thank you very much for calling me to speak in this interesting debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I believe that 23 June will be the most momentous day in this country’s history, or certainly in my lifetime. We have the opportunity to get our country back, and I very much hope for all our sakes that we take it.

I was inspired by the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), because it was so positive. That is what the out campaign is. Today we have heard from the in campaign that leaving would be a leap in the dark. We have heard about the risks—shut the curtains, close the door. Not quite “Dad’s Army”-style “doomed”, but not far off it. Let me tell those who do our country down, as I believe they do by speaking like that, that we will have huge aspiration, hope and opportunity if we leave the EU. We have absolutely nothing to fear from leaving what has, in effect, become a welfare state or the equivalent.

We are now reliant on nanny—let us call the EU nanny. Nanny has bred us, sucked us, brought us up and given us things when we asked for them, even when we did not deserve them. When we reach a certain age and it is time to break free from nanny and the cot and to get out there and start to grow up, we are told that we may not do so—or worse, we have been bred to the point that we do not want to leave. Sadly, that is the position of this great country.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) mentioned his grandfather, for whom I have the most huge respect, as does the nation. I did not know him; I wish I had, but from the history books that I have read, I believe he would be on the side of those who want to get their country back. We often hear from the newspapers, commentators and those who want to stay in that we are all, as I recall the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) describing us, middle-aged grey-haired gentlemen. I hope that I have got that right. We are portrayed as swivel-eyed lunatics who want to leave the EU, dig a hole in the garden, stick up the Union Jack and sing “God Save the Queen.” Oh, if only it were that simple.

We do not want that at all, but we do want to be free to control our destiny, our sovereignty, our democracy. Every speech I have heard warning of the risks of leaving predicts that suddenly we will not trade with Europe, and all communication and intelligence will shut down overnight. We are told that there are 5,000 terrorists heading into the United Kingdom, or certainly to Europe and then, no doubt, on to us. Are our former partners in Europe not going to tell us? Are they going to sit there mute while London is blown apart, or Glasgow, Manchester or Birmingham? Those are, so the Europhiles say, our allies. They are friends; they are decent people. We do not dislike them. We love the Europeans. I am British and a European, and I am extremely proud of it. I want to be in Europe and to trade with Europe. I want to enjoy their culture, their languages, their mountains, their seas, their more efficient trains, their wider and faster roads and their beautiful wine; I want to enjoy it all, as we all do. But, like millions of people in this country, I do not want to be ruled by unelected bureaucrats.

I sit on the European Scrutiny Committee, which is a great privilege, under the most able chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). He might like to hear about the conversation I had with my taxi driver last night as I was heading home—I always talk with the drivers, because they are always fascinating men and women. When he asked me who I was, I replied, “I’m an MP, but please don’t press the ejector button.” He promised not to. Then he said, “Tell me, guv, what do you think about the EU?” I said, “It’s simple. Do you want to control the future of this country, or do you want to hand it across to unelected bureaucrats and a political elite who are completely out of touch with the electorate?” He said, “Guv, do you know William Cash?” I explained that I did and that he is a great friend of mine. He said, “He sat in my cab 25 years ago and said the same thing.” That story is...
[Richard Drax]

absolutely true. My hon. Friend, who is far-sighted, was right then, and he is right now. Let us get our freedom back on 23 June.

3.51 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I realise that I am one of a sadly dwindling number of Members of Parliament who not only remember the ’75 referendum, but campaigned in it. Indeed, I feel a certain sympathy with those on the Government Front Bench, because in the years running up to the referendum I was a very beleaguered pro-European member of the Labour party, at a time when both the parliamentary party and the party membership as a whole were adamantly opposed to it.

I supported our entry into the European Community, as it then was, because many of the reasons given for our doing so were visionary, and many of them I heard articulated today most eloquently by the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) and, to a lesser extent, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). I in no way repudiate the vision I had when I supported Europe in those years. In the meantime, like many people, I have become frustrated with the way in which Europe conducts its business, getting bogged down in the minutiae of regulation, rather than pursuing the grand visions and aspirations we saw back then. However, at no stage have I ever believed that coming out of Europe would do anything to resolve those issues, and I have not changed my position now.

I will use the brief time available to me to state why I am still so firmly committed to our membership of the European Union. I welcome the referendum as an opportunity to get away from the minutiae of some of the debates we have had and to talk about the role that Britain has in Europe, and its potential role out of Europe, and exactly what considerations people will need to exercise when they cast their vote on 23 June. I still have those grand visions of Europe, but I understand, as I think we all do, that people will base their decision on what they perceive to be in their best interests and those of their country.

No area can understand and appreciate the value that Europe has brought better than the west midlands. The Centre for Economics and Business Research showed in 2011 that about 400,000 jobs in the west midlands were linked to trade with Europe, 200,000 of which were in manufacturing. That was before the huge investment that has come from the Tata family, first in Solihull and latterly in the i54 development outside Wolverhampton. They have made it clear that one of the prime considerations in that investment was our membership of the EU and its market. Toyota and Nissan have uttered similar sentiments about investment in other parts of the country.

We must remember that it is not just the major car assembly companies but the network of small manufacturing businesses that supply them that are so dependent on our trade with Europe. We must also remember that 50% of our cars are exported—half of them going to the EU. If anything prejudiced our ability to export them, the impact on areas such as mine in the west midlands would be devastating.

Nobody pretends that the EU is a perfect institution, or that exit from it would be an immediate catastrophe, but in these days of footloose international development, a major manufacturer wanting to invest in the car industry or in other manufacturing, if given the choice of investing in a mainland Europe EU market of 440 million people or a UK market of 60 million people outside the EU, would almost certainly opt for the former. That is a hard, real fact of political life, which we must live with. We must make sure that these things do not happen.

The other main point I want to make is that, if we look to the future, the global economies are going to be China, India and, no doubt, the USA, with possibly south America and even Africa coming up. Crucially, our ability to negotiate with them and to access their markets depends on our being part of the EU. To those who say we are a great nation, I say, yes, we are—we are a great nation because we are in the EU. There is no reason for believing that if we cannot shape the EU, we will be able to shape the approach taken by China, Brazil, India or the USA if we are outside it. The fact is that we gain strength in our international relations by being part and parcel of the EU and by working with like-minded people to realise an international trading framework based on the valued principles that we have in our western societies and democracies.

3.57 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): When was it ever said of the great figures of history that they learned to suffer tolerable evils and irritations because they thought change too difficult. That is not the tone of the great history of mankind that has led us to this place; it is the creed of slaves—the tone of failure—but it characterises the Government’s position and the campaign we are being offered by Britain Stronger in Europe.

We have chosen to place before the public an historic decision that will stay with us for generations, and it should be taken in a way that reflects the tone of my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames). While I may disagree with him, his speech at least had the merit of being a great speech by a great man, and it deserves to be remembered by history, if I may say so—unlike the rest of the remarks we have heard.

In that respect, I have to say that I listened to the Foreign Secretary’s speech with dismay, as he started once again by listing all his misgivings about the European Union and all the problems with it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills would expect me to mention the article he wrote in The Mail on Sunday, in which he said:

“It’s clear now that the United Kingdom should never have joined the European Union. In many ways, it’s a failing project, an overblown bureaucracy in need of wide-ranging and urgent reform.

Had we never taken the fateful decision to sign up, the UK would still, of course, be a successful country with a strong economy...That’s why, with a heavy heart and no enthusiasm, I shall be voting for the UK to remain a member of the European Union.”

I am deeply fond of my right hon. Friend, but that is not the tone I wish my country to follow at this time or the picture I wish to be placed before the public.

What is at stake in this debate is not whether we co-operate with the nations of Europe, but the basis on which we co-operate with them and with the world.
Healthy co-operation is voluntary—I believe in that most strongly. Human prosperity, fulfilment and dignity are all underscored by liberty, and another name for liberty is self-government. That is what I came here to deliver—the ability to have the dignity of determining our own destiny at the ballot box. That is the great gift that we should hand on to our children. Whenever somebody says to me that we should remain in because we must think of what we hand on to the next generation and the one after, I always think that the great gift that history has shown we must always hand on to the next generation is the gift of parliamentary democracy and self-government, which lead to the flourishing of liberty, prosperity and humankind.

The terrain of this debate and the polls are leading to a real problem for what I will call the pro-EU BSE campaign, for the sake of brevity, and the Government. This recalcitrance is doing no good for our own country and no good for the nations of Europe. I do not have time to critique each detail of the Government’s position. Suffice it to say that when one finds oneself listening, as I did—like many Members, I am sure—to the presenter John Humphrys on the “Today” programme asking, in a sarcastic aside, “Are we still calling this a renegotiation?” then one knows the jig is up. The Government’s position is not a fundamental renegotiation; it is a trivial one. Some of the benefits are worth having—I hesitate to say that they are not worth having—but they are marginal at best. When the front cover of The Week shows the Prime Minister pulling a tiny white rabbit out of a hat, we know the jig is up. When The Spectator shows the Prime Minister with a food tray, lifting the lid with glee and finding a tiny morsel on the plate, we know the jig is up. I am afraid that this renegotiation is a laughing stock, and it is doing the Government no good whatsoever to present it as anything other than a trivial set of changes.

We have ended up talking about whether the deal is binding. We are indebted to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for putting contrary evidence before us. I think it is fair to say that claiming that this deal is legally binding is to torture the English language in a way that only qualified lawyers are capable of doing. It is ridiculous to claim that it will materially affect the trajectory of our membership. It is largely symbolic—the word that was used to me by some continental politicians who visited to hear my views.

This is a shambles, if I may say so. It is not merely a shambles—it is becoming a rolling fiasco as day after day the Government lurch from one position to another trying to defend their renegotiation. We had the shambles of General Sir Michael Rose saying he had never signed the letter about jobs, it turns out that 36 of them received £120 million in grants from the European Commission and spent £21.4 million lobbying the EU. That is all very well for them, but not so good for the small company in my constituency that was very nearly out of business because of ridiculous REACH regulations brought forward, no doubt, by companies that were able to lobby in this way.

I will not return to the remarks I made on 2 February, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), I will seek not to repeat any of the excellent points that have already been made but try to introduce a few more into the debate.

Membership of the EU is important for Scotland and for the United Kingdom, but we need to work hard to maximise its potential. The Prime Minister has, most unfortunately, focused on peripheral issues rather than seeking to grasp the real opportunity that came before us during the negotiation process. Whatever the result of the referendum, the way in which we are perceived by our fellow member states is extremely important. I certainly do not want to be seen as carping from the sidelines as opposed to leading from the front in any debate in the EU.

This week I asked two Ministers if they could set out the cost of implementing this deal, particularly in relation to the benefits changes. Neither of them was able to do so. It is important to have clarity on whether or not the proposed restrictions and the administration thereof will leave the Treasury with a net saving.

The deal is a sideshow that fails to address really important issues. There were 27 Heads of State around the table and the Prime Minister clearly had their ear, so where were the discussions to improve the transparency of negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and to secure the necessary changes to protect our public services and uphold the principle that our Parliaments can pass legislation without challenge from international corporations? Where was the agreement to ensure that Ministers from elected Administrations across these islands—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—have a right to attend meetings and lead discussions in which devolved issues are debated and agreed, and to act as substitutes when UK Ministers are not available, rather than sending unelected Lords in their place, sometimes with no knowledge of their brief?

Over and above those issues, last year Scotland’s First Minister set out the key areas of reform that we want as a member of the EU. The EU should allow member states more autonomy to tackle pressing national problems, such as those relating to public health. Member states should be allowed to take the decisions they deem necessary to protect life and promote health. The EU should complete the single market in services and work to deliver President Juncker’s priority of a digital service market, as my hon. Friend the Member for West...
Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson) said. On energy, an integrated EU energy market would benefit consumers and provide greater security of supply. We want regulatory reform to include changes to allow more decisions to be made at a regional rather than EU level. We should be negotiating for those things from within as a willing member of the EU wanting to play a full part, not as a reluctant tag-along, which is how we are now consistently seen.

EU membership is good for Scotland. Of course, the best deal for Scotland would be for us to have our own seat at the table as an independent and proud nation. However, despite the fact that Scotland is not a member state yet, we absolutely benefit from our current membership status, not least because EU companies add nearly £16 billion to Scotland’s economy. Scottish workers also get vital protections because we are in the EU, including guaranteed holiday and maternity leave, and protection from discrimination.

Our EU membership keeps a check on this Tory Government, for whom Scotland did not vote. Over and above the positive benefits of EU membership, it has become increasingly clear over the past week that one of its fundamental benefits is that it keeps this Government in check. The Justice Secretary wrote last week:

“it is hard to overstate the degree to which the EU is a constraint on ministers’ ability to do the things they were elected to do, or to use their judgment about the right course of action for the people of this country.”

If the EU really acts as a handbrake on this Tory Government’s plans to dismantle workers’ rights and to wreck our environment, that is another extremely compelling argument if there ever was one for those of us on this side of the Chamber who want to stay in the EU and support our continued membership of it.

The EU referendum has all along been driven by the Tory party’s long-standing internal divisions on Europe and the challenge to the Conservatives from the UK Independence party, rather than the specifics of the Prime Minister’s renegotiation. The campaign to remain must learn the lessons of the mistakes that were all too clear in the “Project Fear” campaign in the Scottish referendum.

As things stand, it is increasingly likely that Scottish votes will play a crucial part in retaining the UK’s EU membership. My colleagues and I are happy to step up and make the positive argument for Europe, because that is the right thing for our country. Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, will no doubt be a leading and welcome light in the debate, and this House and people across these islands can look forward to an SNP campaign that will be uplifting, upbeat and visionary.

4.8 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): It was very reassuring to hear my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary tell us earlier that he is a Eurosceptic and explain how successful the renegotiations were from his Eurosceptic ivory tower. That is encouraging, but I thought it might be worth looking at what the renegotiations achieved compared with what Her Majesty’s Government set out. In the Conservative party manifesto, it was “an absolute requirement”, according to the opening of the paragraph, that child benefit not be given to anybody whose children are living abroad. It seems to me that that has not been achieved, so our Eurosceptic Foreign Secretary has failed in that regard.

The Conservative party manifesto stated that we would “reform the workings of the EU, which is too big, too bossy and too bureaucratic”. The workings of the EU post the renegotiation remain too big, too bossy and too bureaucratic, so my Eurosceptic friend has achieved nothing.

In the Conservative party manifesto we made to the British people a pledge and a promise, on which we campaigned in, I hope, good faith. We said that we would “reclaim power from Brussels on your behalf”—not yours, Mr Deputy Speaker, but that of the British people—“and safeguard British interests in the Single Market”.

We have not reclaimed a single power, so, in that, my Eurosceptic friend the Foreign Secretary has failed to live up to the Eurosceptic credentials of which he boasts—and with which I credit him, because the Foreign Secretary is an honourable man.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that what we needed was fundamental and far-reaching reform. We have not achieved fundamental and far-reaching reform; his Eurosceptic Foreign Secretary has, in that regard, let him down. In the renegotiations, we have not achieved anything of any great substance. On the free movement of people, we have nothing. We have so little on the issue of benefits that the great mass migration will continue. It was announced today that 257,000 people came from the European Union in the last year, 55,000 of them from Bulgaria and Romania. My Eurosceptic friend has done nothing to change that.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in his Bloomberg speech:

“Complex rules restricting our labour markets are not some naturally occurring phenomenon. Just as excessive regulation is not some external plague that’s been visited on our businesses.”

But that plague is to continue, and the renegotiations have done nothing to stop it. They have not summoned Moses back to try to deal with it, as I seem to remember he finally got rid of the plague of frogs that afflicted Pharaoh. On immigration, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that he thought it was essential to “restore a sense of fairness”

and

“to make our immigration system fairer and reduce the current exceptionally high level of migration from…the EU”.

Nothing has been done to achieve that.

Not only is the renegotiation a failure because it has achieved so little—it has failed to tackle the problems that we promised the British electorate we would solve—but, worse than that, we have given away our negotiating card when the European Union comes to a fundamental treaty reform of its own. The document that was settled last weekend states:

“Member states whose currency is not the euro shall not impede the implementation of legal acts directly linked to the functioning of the euro area and shall refrain from measures which could jeopardise the attainment of the objectives of economic and monetary union.”
Sir William Cash: May I refer the hon. and learned Lady to chapter 12 of “The Rule of Law” by the late Lord Justice Bingham, in which he severely criticises other members of the Supreme Court for taking what he would describe as a wrong view of the whole question of sovereignty.

Joanna Cherry: I am very well aware of Lord Bingham’s opinion of the views expressed in the Jackson case. I am not saying they are binding precedents—they are opinions. My point is that the opinion of Lord Hope of Craighead in Jackson and of Lord President Cooper in the 1953 case are very well founded in Scottish historical tradition.

We heard much in the Chamber last year about Magna Carta, which was signed at Runnymede in 1215. Arbroath is Scotland’s Runnymede, and Scotland’s Magna Carta is the Declaration of Arbroath. It recognised that the people, not Parliament, are sovereign in Scotland. That is the difference between Scottish and English constitutional law, which is of long standing, and I ask the Government to reflect that in their Bill on British sovereignty.

The Declaration of Arbroath was a letter, written by the nobility of Scotland to the Pope in 1320, that asserted the nationhood of Scotland, our right to independence and the right of the Scottish people to choose their King—the people’s sovereignty. Most importantly, the Declaration of Arbroath said that the independence of Scotland was the prerogative of the Scottish people, rather than the King of Scots, and that the nobility—at that time, the nobility were, for these purposes, the people of Scotland—would choose someone else to be king if Robert the Bruce proved unfit in maintaining Scotland’s independence. That last point has been interpreted by many scholars as an early expression of the notion of popular sovereignty—that Government is contractual and that kings can be chosen by the community, rather than by God alone. We find that notion of popular sovereignty in other modern democracies that consider themselves to be governed by the rule of law, rather than parliamentary sovereignty. Of course, law can have many sources.

Alex Salmond: Is it not also correct that the community of the realm passage, to which my hon. and learned Friend referred, has been cited in a Senate resolution as an inspiration for the American declaration of popular sovereignty, the declaration of independence?
Joanna Cherry: My right hon. Friend is quite correct. Many of the founding fathers of the American constitution were of Scots descent and therefore drew on the Declaration of Arbroath in framing it.

Anyone who doubts that there is a firm foundation for the notion that in Scotland the people are sovereign should look to the writings of the late Professor Neil MacCormick, who was regius professor emeritus of public law and the law of nature and nations at the University of Edinburgh. He was a distinguished Scottish nationalist and the son of the petitioner in the MacCormick case that I mentioned earlier, as well as being an internationally recognised jurist. Nobody could doubt his eminence in the field of public law and constitutional theory.

What I am asking for is respect when this Parliament comes to debate the Prime Minister’s Bill that deals with British sovereignty, if that is what we are going to have. I understand that many hon. Members from England hold Dicey’s doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty very dear and I am aware that it can be traced back to Tudor times and beyond. I am sure that they will be keen to preserve it, insofar as it has not suffered many knocks already.

However, we were told repeatedly during the Scottish independence referendum that Scotland was an equal partner in the Union. Therefore, I am sure that hon. Members from England, including the Prime Minister and the Government, will wish to accord the Scottish doctrine of the sovereignty of the people of Scotland equal respect. When our two Parliaments united in 1707, it was not the case that the English Parliament somehow swallowed whole the Scottish Parliament. It was a Union of two Parliaments. Therefore, it is not logical to say that the English notion of the doctrine of the sovereignty of Parliament should reign supreme, and that the Scottish notion of the doctrine of the sovereignty of the people should be ignored.

In fact, it is often said that the advocates of parliamentary sovereignty are defending a doctrine that not even the higher English judiciary believe in any more. It is interesting to observe—I am very indebted to my friend, Lord Lester of Herne Hill, for drawing this to my attention—that Dicey himself, in his ardent opposition to Irish home rule, was prepared to depart from his doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty. In 1913, Dicey contended that if Asquith’s Home Rule Bill was enacted by this Parliament, it “would have no constitutional validity as a law” and that “it would be justifiable for the Ulster Unionists to resort to rebellion, if necessary, to prevent Irish Home Rule”.

If any hon. Members are interested in the reference for that, I can give it to them later. So even Dicey himself was prepared to depart from the notion that the English Parliament was wholly sovereign.

If the doctrine of parliamentary supremacy is compromised in English law, even by its greatest exponent, there is all the more reason for the UK Government to recognise that it has no counterpart in Scotland, to tread carefully when they bring forward their British sovereignty Bill and to accord some respect to the different notions of sovereignty across these islands.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): In the same year as the 1975 referendum, Peter Finch won an Oscar for his role in the film “Network”, with its cry, “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not gonna take this anymore!” It is that sense of alienation from the elites that I believe will drive the vote to exit the European Union on 23 June.

Look around us. Why do hon. Members, particularly those who advocate our remaining in the European Union, think that the Chamber is barely full? Can they not see a link between the growing power of the European Union and its influence on our democracy, and the fact that we are trapped here in this Rutarianian palace, with diminishing powers to influence our fellow citizens?

I have always been a consistent patriot in terms of my opposition to the sometimes defeatist, sycophantic and self-loathing attitude of too many people, which has been rampant in my party for too long. I opposed the crazy policy in 1997 of ruling out the single currency for one Parliament, and I opposed the policy of “wait and see”—as if people would “wait and see”—whether they wanted to board the Titanic. I have supported the policy of opposing the single currency, which my party has held for 10 years.

Like many Conservative MPs, I wished the Prime Minister well in his negotiations with other EU states, and I kept my counsel, hoping that the pledges he made in the Bloomberg speech in January 2013 would be enacted. Sadly, they were not. The EU is not willing to reform itself in a way that I believe would be beneficial and desirable to secure its own long-term future, and its leaders remain wedded to a bureaucratic, sclerotic political behemoth, disdainful of popular democratic accountability and national sensitivities, hurtling towards greater and ever closer union, and unconcerned by the serious and profound reservations of the British people and their elected representatives. As I said, in my opinion the European Union has already inflicted huge damage on the economies of Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Ireland in the pursuit of monetary dogma and ideological obsessions, driven by the mania of a single currency that operates across a hugely disparate and discrete economic area, primarily at the behest of German monetary policy.

In truth, the EU is a concept whose time has come and gone—an anachronism. Within 20 years, only $1 in $6 of world trade will be within the European Union. In the past six years the UK has run a £59 billion deficit with the EU, but a massive surplus across the world, and we cannot truly exploit those opportunities because we are locked into EU trade agreements, rather than our own bilateral agreements with places such as China, Mexico, Brazil, India, South Africa and Canada—markets that would generate British jobs and prosperity.

The negotiations have been a failure. They are crumbs from the table. The process has been depressing, and an historic opportunity for proper reform has been lost, perhaps forever. The Prime Minister asked for very little and he got less than that. Any changes have been given grudgingly. We have failed to abide by our manifesto commitment on child benefit, and no powers have been repatriated to the House of Commons. The European Court of Justice still takes precedence over UK law,
there is no guarantee that the UK’s demands or “exceptions” will be incorporated in any new treaties, and the whole deal is legally unenforceable.

One always views issues through the prism of one’s own constituency, and I am surprised and disappointed that my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) did not mention immigration, given that he co-chairs the cross-party group on balanced migration. My constituency has seen the effects of globalisation and the free movement directive. Part of that has been good, but it has also meant slum housing, low wages, welfare and health tourism, and people trafficking. People have concluded—quite rightly—that the UK must control its own borders, who comes to the country, and for what reason. The EU denies that aspiration and makes such control impossible now and at any time in the future.

Richard Drax: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jackson: I will not I am afraid because I do not have the time.

We have been told by the plutocratic, self-interested elite, the City, the media, the establishment and the snobby intelligentsia that looks down on ordinary voters that we must stay at the heart of Europe, fight our corner and reform within. That has failed and it is a fool’s errand to believe that it will not be a calamitous failure in the future. We know what Brexit will be like, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) has said.

In conclusion, all power is a leasehold given to us on trust, and it is not ours to give away. For too long we have been selling the democratic family silver—as Macmillan would have said—trading our own sovereign Parliament and its powers. I trust my constituents to make the right decision, and I will campaign enthusiastically to leave the European Union.

4.29 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Thank you for the opportunity to speak in today’s important debate, Mr Deputy Speaker.

My party, the Greens, welcomes the referendum. Our position is strongly in favour of staying in the EU. Since we have been talking a lot about passion this afternoon, I will admit that, yes, I do feel passionately about this cause. That is not because I support the Prime Minister’s renegotiation—and by large I do not. What is at stake is much bigger than the small beans of his discussions. It is not because I think the EU is perfect. It is not. But do you know what? This place is not perfect either, and I have not heard Brexit supporters suggest recently that we leave the House of Commons. It is not just because our EU membership has given us some of the strongest protection for the environment, wildlife and nature, although it most certainly has. And it is not only because there is a very strong economic case for staying in, although there most certainly is. No, above all, the Greens are in favour of the UK remaining in the EU because this is a choice about the kind of country we want to be, the kind of people we are and the kind of future we want for our children and grandchildren. The choice before us is about more than a transactional calculation. It is about whether we are outward looking and confident about our place in the world. It is about whether, in a world beset by economic, security and ecological problems that transcend borders, we believe we can do better by working together, co-operating and collaborating than by turning our backs on our closest neighbours.

Over recent weeks and months, we have seen a blossoming of alternative, radical pro-EU movements: Students4Europe, Scientists for EU, Environmentalists for Europe and Another Europe is Possible. Both in the UK and across Europe, progressive movements are growing and linking up, sharing a vision for a Europe of democracy, sustainability and social justice.

Having spent more than 10 years in the European Parliament as an MEP, I am under absolutely no illusions about the flaws of the EU and the need for reform. I was confronted almost daily with the fact that its original big idea—to bring peace to post-war Europe by binding its nations together in an ambitious free trade project—is no longer enough to sustain public support for the EU. Indeed, for some its narrow focus on economics alone is actually fuelling opposition to it.

I am very clear that the EU needs to become more democratic, transparent, accessible and accountable, and that it needs a new big idea based on sustainability and social justice. Nevertheless, the European story goes to the heart of what the referendum is about. It is a remarkable story: countries with different histories and cultures coming together and choosing to share some degree of sovereignty, while keeping their own identities and traditions to work together for the common good, and to achieve more together than they can alone. For all its cumbersome processes and procedures, it is quite extraordinary that, on this troubled continent that historically has been so prone to conflict, it is now inconceivable that there will be war between us. We resolve our differences now not on the battlefield but in the debating chamber.

I know I have used the dreaded “s” word, sovereignty, so let me say a few more words about it. I know that for some hon. Members sovereignty is an absolute like pregnancy—either you are, or you are not—but in today’s interdependent world of multilateral agreements and processes, real sovereignty is inevitably relative. A recent splendid article in The Economist puts it very clearly:

“A country that refuses outright to pool authority is one that has no control over the pollution drifting over its borders, the standards of financial regulation affecting its economy, the consumer and trade norms to which its exporters and importers are bound, the cleanliness of its seas and the security and economic crises propelling shock waves—migration, terrorism, market volatility—deep into domestic life. To live with globalisation is to acknowledge that many laws...are international beasts whether we like it or not. If sovereignty is the absence of mutual interference, the most sovereign country in the world is North Korea.”

Indeed! It strikes me as very odd that the very same people who are most concerned about what they perceive as a loss of sovereignty in the EU are entirely relaxed about the much greater loss of sovereignty involved in us signing up to damaging trade agreements such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Such agreements are designed to grant sweeping rights to corporations to sue democratically elected Governments for potential loss of profit if they dare to legislate in the name of the public interest to protect public health or vital natural resources. It is inconsistent and hypocritical to argue that the UK should leave the EU because of a
loss of democracy and sovereignty, while at the same
time being among the biggest supporters of the UK
signing more secretive and dodgy anti-democratic deals.
I recognise that however much I oppose TTIP—and I
do—we are not going to extricate ourselves from it by
leaving the EU, not least because the UK Government
are among the biggest and loudest cheerleaders for it
and they would be putting it into bilateral agreements
as soon as we left.

In the short time I have left, I want to set out a few of
the Green priorities for a reformed EU. These are the
reforms that we will be fighting for not just during this
referendum, but hopefully in the weeks and months
following. Some of the greatest benefits from our EU
membership come from workplace and environmental
protections, but we need those social and environmental
standards to be given primacy over single market rules
and competitiveness. With the recent action against
Google’s compulsive tax-dodging tendencies, we have
seen the value of EU-wide action. There is again further
to go—on banking and tax justice, banking regulation,
including an EU-wide financial tax and tougher EU
rules to close tax loopholes and tackle tax fraud and
evasion.

There are a whole range of ways by which we could
right now make the EU more transparent and accountable
and more democratic, if the political will is there, but
we need to be in it to change it. My plea to Members in
the Chamber today and beyond is for us please to stay
in the EU. Let us make it into the vehicle that could be
and, in our dreams, it is.

4.35 pm

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab):
Even before we get into the machinations of referendums
and the pros and cons of Brexit, let us note that the
European influence on our very language has been
around a while, with Spanish omelettes, German meases,
Dutch auctions and, more risqué, French letters and
French kissing—well, we are talking European affairs,
are we not?

What was once a continent across the channel with a
faint novelty value is now being painted by many people
as something sinister that is to be feared and demonised.
It is regrettable that the word “Europe” seems to conjure
up all sorts of phenomena. Its opponents put on the
frighteners, mostly about migration as a proxy for all
sorts of other things, but it has many dimensions that
go much wider than that.

At the time of the last referendum, when I was three,
the chief association with Europe was economic: it was
the European Economic Community. There is a picture
of Mrs Thatcher in a patchwork dress made of European
flags. Then in the '80s, as my right hon. Friend the
Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) described, the
idea of social Europe took root and attitudes changed
on the left. The idea of Europe as a capitalist club was
dissolved. On all those and many other fronts—the
hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas)
mentioned climate change, which knows no borders—it
is vital for us to stay in Europe, because the case to act
with our European partners is compelling.

Leaving behind our biggest trading partner would
put jobs and growth at risk, as Members have said. The
mere mention of the date of the referendum caused
turmoil in the markets, which should be viewed as a
precursor of things to come if the result goes the way of
leaving. When I meet Europhobes on doorsteps and ask
them which directive is interfering with their lives, they
are always at a loss to say anything. It is not the
European working time directive; it is not worker protection
via maternity or paternity leave; it is not EU competition
agreements, which have brought down airline ticket
prices and roaming charges. It is by working together
with our European partners that we can catch criminals,
through mechanisms such as the European arrest warrant.
Like climate change, criminals do not operate within
national borders.

Our small island is much stronger with the combined
might of 28 nation states than we ever could be alone.
The implications are wide ranging. I came here from the
university sector, in which there is great worry about
European science funding, which is massively derived
from the EU budget. Even student mobility programmes
that allow us make broad-minded cultural exchanges,
such as Erasmus, are threatened.

Europe is not an easy puzzle to solve; like a Rubik’s
cube, it has several interlocking challenges across its
nation states and between them. Members have described
today the refugee crisis, the worrying rise in anti-Semitism,
biting austerity and Greece going bust, not to mention
the existential crisis that we face when we have to decide
between in and out. Reforming our alliance with Europe
is not about a wham bam thank you ma’am shotgun
wedding: it is a long process.

In many senses, our existing relationship with Europe
could be described as somewhat semi-detached. We
never were in the euro—thanks to Gordon Brown—or
in Schengen. That predates Friday’s so-called deal. I
remember an old Conservative slogan about being “in
Europe, but not led by Europe”, and I think there is
something in that.

In an age of globalisation, we are part of numerous
international alliances. John Kerry and President Obama
have said that the special transatlantic relationship would
be at risk if we left Europe. Even the heir to our throne,
Prince William, has said this week that the UK is
enormously strengthened by our broader partnerships
in NATO, the UN and so forth. Even our historical ties
to the Commonwealth—the ex-British empire on which
the sun supposedly never set—provide no impediment
to European membership, because the two are not
mutually exclusive.

Let us not forget that, as was pointed out at the
beginning of this epic debate many hours ago, since the
formation of the original European Coal and Steel
Community and throughout the days of both the European
Economic Community and the European Union, Europe
has kept the peace. Let us also remember that previous
generations been ravaged by two world wars during a
short space of time.

As I am a London Member of Parliament, I might as
well mention our nation’s great capital. From its centre
all the way out to its multi-ethnic suburbs, it is a
globalised mega-city. The attention-seeking endorsement
of the leave campaign by our London Mayor—who
moonlights as the hon. Member for Uxbridge and
South Ruislip—after a calculated period of indecision
is completely out of step with our outward-facing, polyglot capital. I should add that when the Mayor visited my constituency, our vote went up by 13% and I would hope that his dalliance on the wrong side of the argument works again.

I return to the continental words that have appeared in our lexicon. When I think of the way in which the Prime Minister was boxed into a corner by the lunatic fringe of his own party, two words spring to my mind. I will not mention Schadenfreude, because we would not wish that on anyone, would we? “Bête noire”, however, seems to be what Europe has become for the Conservative party.

Let all of us—Members in all parts of the House—who believe in the right side of this argument encourage everyone to repeat the 1975 referendum result, so that we can remain in the European Union, European affairs can proceed to their next chapter and we can continue to build the European project.

4.41 pm

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate. I have recently sat through a number of EU debates in the Chamber that have been much less powerful and have centred on just one side of the argument, and I have listened ad infinitum to dry arguments about process. However, today’s debate has not been like that. The starting gun—the announcement of the date of the referendum—has opened the door to both sides of the argument and raised the level of the debate.

We have heard a number of outstanding contributions today. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) set out the arguments for remaining in the European Union very clearly, in a speech that balanced high eloquence with pragmatism. I could not fail to refer to the speech made by the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), which I think we would all agree was passionate and eloquent. If I may say so, it was worthy of his grandfather. It was one of the best speeches that I have heard during my time in the House.

Both my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) and the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) made thoughtful and measured contributions, while my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) made the patriotic, progressive case for remaining in the EU. Although I did not agree with his comments about an independent Scotland, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) spoke passionately about the formation of the EU and the dividend of peace. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson) entertained us with a personal story about the practical everyday importance of the European health card to European citizens on holiday.

On this issue, Labour is united. The parliamentary Labour party, constituency Labour parties up and down the country, the Labour membership, and, according to the results of polling over time, the vast majority of Labour voters believe that Britain is safer, stronger and more prosperous as part of the European Union. That is our view, and that is what we will campaign on. The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) made it clear that Labour voters would be crucial in the referendum. I think that trade union members will be as well—and women.

A couple of weeks ago, I witnessed a conversation between a husband and wife. I observed the conversation, rather than taking part in it. The husband, who is a maths graduate, said, “I am interested in chaos theory, so I would be quite interested to see what would happen if we left the European Union, because I do not think it would look like what either side is saying it would look like.” His wife leaned across the table and said to him, “Don’t you dare! I have three kids, and this is about my children’s future.” I think that such conversations will happen increasingly as we move towards the referendum. Mothers and grandmothers will be making decisions that will have an impact on the future of this country, and I think that, in making those decisions, they will recognise that Britain has become a rich country as part of the European Union: the fifth biggest economy in the world, and the second biggest in the EU.

I am old enough to remember a time before our membership, when our national newspapers were fond of calling this great country the sick old man of Europe. If that was ever true, it is no longer true. The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) asked, “If we are not in Schengen and we are not in the eurozone, what is the point of being in the EU?” Well, millions of jobs depend directly or indirectly upon our being a member of the EU. In my area of the north-east, 70% of the trade that we do is with the EU. In one city in the north-east we make more cars in one month than Italy does in a year. If we go to Teesport or the Port of Tyne, we see line after line of cars that are being exported from this country to the EU. As a country, nearly 50% of our trade is with the EU. We carried out £44 billion of trade last year, and we received £1.2 trillion of investment, a third of it directly from the EU.

Mr Jackson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Pat Glass: No; the hon. Gentleman has had the floor quite a lot today.

A third of that trade is from the EU, but the remainder is from countries outside the EU solely because we are a gateway to the EU.

I have listened to the arguments from the outers who believe that the world is just lining up to enter into trade agreements with us once we leave the EU, but they should stop talking and listening to each other and start listening to what the rest of the world is telling us. I was in Sweden this week, where the Government told me that of course they want to continue trading with the UK if we leave, but only as part of a trade deal worked out with the EU. Such a deal would cost us heavily and require that we conform to the same rules and regulations as the rest of the Europe, including the free movement of people. The idea that we can magically walk away from the EU and yet retain advantageous trade deals that exist only because we are a member of the EU is, quite frankly, la-la land. At a time when we are facing increasing dangers from international terrorism, international crime, climate change and Russian expansionism, it is dangerous to think that it is a good idea to sit isolated on the edge of the biggest trading group in the world.
Labour will campaign in this referendum to remain in the EU not as it is, but as it could be. We want to see Europe deal with some of the issues that we cannot deal with alone—not just international terrorism and crime, war and migration across the world and climate change, but exploitative practices by employers who seek to undercut the wages of workers and international tax evasion by global companies. We cannot hope to deal with the Googles of this world alone; we can only do that with our partners.

Finally, I want to talk to the young people out there who may be listening to this debate. The EU was formed not as a political experiment or project, nor just as an economic market; its first purpose was to stop the regular slaughter that went on in western Europe every 30 years. I appreciate that the EU is not the only reason why my son is not lying in some cold grave outside Ypres or Thiepval as my great-grandfather and his brother are, but we now settle our differences around a negotiating table and not on a battlefield. I absolutely appreciate how difficult it is to get agreement between 28 countries, but surely it is far, far better than what went before. The peace dividend of the EU is huge and is as important today as it was in 1945. I want us to vote to remain in the EU, to ensure that the killing fields of 1914 to 1918 and 1939 to 1945 do not happen again to the young people of our country, today or at any time in the future.

4.48 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): May I first congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate this afternoon?

Mr Rees-Mogg: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought the Minister might begin with an apology for the absence of the Foreign Secretary. It is custom for senior Ministers who have opened debates to return for the end of them. On such an important matter, it is a rather surprising discourtesy to the House that the normal convention has not been observed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. What I would say is that it is the choice of the Foreign Secretary, and who knows, we may hear something yet, as the Minister for Europe has so far only managed to get three words out.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) raised important points about what he saw as security risks from people who had migrated to Germany crossing to the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) said, accurately, that we have some pretty effective security arrangements at our borders and that the record shows not only that the chief terrorist threat to the United Kingdom too often comes from British citizens, but that there have been terrorist incidents abroad that have been brought about by people who were British born and bred. In Germany, it takes eight to 10 years for someone to get citizenship, and they have to have a clean criminal record, pass an integration test and show that they have an independent source of income. It is probably because those tests are so rigorous that only 2.2% of refugees in Germany take German citizenship.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Does the Minister understand the point here? If there is not to be a vote in this place because it is superseded by a popular sovereignty vote for out, what would be the circumstances, under the Sewel convention, of a vote in the Scottish Parliament if the popular vote in Scotland had been for in?

Mr Lidington: The United Kingdom is the signatory to the European treaties, and therefore it is the UK Government who take the decision on whether to invoke article 50.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Rees-Mogg) that they are models of consistency in their opposition to British membership of the European Union. If the Prime Minister had come back from Brussels brandishing the severed heads of the members of the European Commission and proceeded to conduct an auto-da-fé in Downing Street of copies of the Lisbon treaty, they would still be saying, “This is feeble, insufficient, not enough.”
The key question in deciding our position on membership is one my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) touched on: how will we be better able to control our destiny and influence for good the lives of the people whom we represent? The point that the leave campaigners must face is that the alternatives that we see—most notably Norway and Switzerland—are countries that, in order to get free trade and the single market, have had to accept not only all the EU regulations that govern those matters without any say or vote in determining them, but the free movement of people and a duty to contribute to the EU budget. That is not sovereignty, but kingship with a paper crown. It would not bring the power to shape European policy and co-operation for the benefit of the people whom we are sent here to represent from all parts of the United Kingdom.

What has dismayed me during this debate is that, apart from my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), there has been little attempt to describe what the alternative is that will somehow enable us to have all the things that we value about European Union membership with none of the things that may matter to other Governments around Europe and which we perhaps find irksome or troubling.

Sir William Cash rose—

Mr Lidington: No, I will not give way.

I am bemused that some of my hon. Friends have managed to convince themselves of two propositions: that other European countries are at present engaged in what has been termed a “vindictive and spiteful” attempt to harm our interests or a conspiracy to do us down; and that those same Governments will rush to give us everything that we want with none of the downsides if only we vote to leave. That is a fanciful analysis of European politics today. If we accept that we want a single market, we must have the EU rules that go with it and the other costs, such as those that Norway and Switzerland have to pay today.

We are putting so much at risk at a time of real peril not just for this country but for the whole of the west. We face a massive economic challenge from global competition and digital technology; a challenge from transnational crime and global terrorism; the collapse of states in parts of Africa and the middle east, which has allowed terrorism, people trafficking and drug trafficking to flourish; and the challenge from a newly aggressive Russia in both eastern Europe and the middle east. No one country in Europe, not even the biggest, will be able to tackle those challenges on its own. That is why our key allies—not just those in Europe, but the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—see the United Kingdom as stronger and more influential in the world as a leader in our own continent. I am dismayed by the insouciant attitude of those who want to leave to the risk that their campaign poses of the possible fragmentation of the west. It is truly shocking.

We need to have confidence in this country’s ability to lead and shape events in Europe, as we have done in creating the single market, in pioneering free trade deals, in organising a firm response through sanctions to Russian aggression in Ukraine and to Iran’s nuclear programme, and in defeating piracy in the Indian ocean.

The United Kingdom should be confident in our ability to work with allies in Europe and around the world. We should not see the two things as in any way contradictory. As we look to the future and face again the challenges of large-scale migration driven by terrorism, failed states, climate change and economic problems in much of the developing world, we need to work together with our partners and our allies, because none of us can tackle that on our own. We see the United Kingdom today as a European power with global interests and global influence. Those two aspects of this country are not contradictory; they complement one another. We need to go forward with the confidence and optimism that the United Kingdom can help make a better future not just for every family in this country but for all the nations of the wider European family. That is the case that I and my right hon. and hon. Friends will be putting to the country in the months to come.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered European affairs.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Have the Government given any indication that they might be interested in making a statement about guidance that they have given to civil servants to restrict information to Ministers during the period of the referendum, which involves concealing information that is being used by other Ministers for campaigning purposes?

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The Minister for Europe is desperate to answer.

Mr Lidington: I am happy to respond. The Prime Minister responded to this point in answer to questions on Monday. The Government have a very clear position, which is to recommend to the country that people vote to remain members of a reformed European Union. Quite exceptionally, Ministers are being allowed to depart from the normal rules on collective responsibility in order to dissent from the official Government position on that referendum question, but the civil service exists to serve and support the policy agreed by the Government of the day. The letter published by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, subsequently extended by formal guidance from the Cabinet secretary to civil servants, does no more than give effect to that policy.

Mr Jenkin: Further to that point of order, I am grateful for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, but that does not answer a great many of the questions. How can I raise this very urgent matter?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The simple answer is that I have had no notification that anybody is going to make a statement. I can do no more than allow the Minister for Europe to reply.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Does the Minister accept that the position that he has just explained comes to an end when the purdah period starts?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Let me help everybody. We are not going into a debate. That is the end of it. We need to move on.
Transport: Glossop and High Peak

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

5.2 pm

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): This is the second time that I have called a debate on the roads in and around Glossop, and I make no apology for debating the subject again in the Chamber. I have called a second debate tonight because of the events of recent weeks, when the inadequacy of these roads has created more misery for my constituents. Such is the strength of feeling about the matter among people who live in High Peak, particularly in Glossop, that there is now a petition on the parliamentary website created by my constituent David Saggerson. As we know, such petitions will trigger a debate if they receive 100,000 signatures. I did not want to wait for that so I am using the Adjournment debate mechanism to hold the debate that almost 3,000 people have already signed up for.

It was recently reported that the viewing figures for the BBC Parliament channel had hit an all-time high. If those figures were measured again tonight around Glossop, and perhaps also in Stalybridge and Hyde, I am sure they would be even greater. That is not because of my constituents’ desire to follow every word and deed of their Member of Parliament—I wish that were so—but it is testament to the desperate need felt in and around Glossop for a solution to the deplorable situation facing residents as they attempt to go about their everyday business. I feel sure that following tonight’s debate, the Minister’s and my own Twitter feeds will see a significant increase in traffic, as will my Facebook page.

In the time allowed, I cannot begin to convey the frustration felt by my residents about this issue, but I intend to try. From our previous conversations I know that the Minister is aware of the situation, but I shall add some background and context.

The Mottram-Tintwistle bypass has become almost as fabled as the Loch Ness monster. Governments of all colours have threatened and promised to deliver it and have conspicuously failed. When I was first elected in 2010, I was conscious of the need to promise my best efforts to deliver this badly needed and much delayed road. I and the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) put aside our political differences and joined forces in an attempt to sort the issue out once and for all.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate, which will be genuinely appreciated in our part of the world. I appreciate the opportunity we have had to work together constructively to make progress on the issue. In 2010, in a difficult financial climate, we were told that this was not a viable option, yet we have been able to make progress, for which I am extremely grateful, as are my constituents.

I also want briefly to thank the Minister. We have dealt with many roads Ministers over the years, but I have always found the current one attentive and genuinely serious about trying to help us. I know that he is planning to visit us very soon, which I appreciate.

The recent problems around Glossop are absolutely untenable, even for a part of the world that is used to congestion. The situation in Broadbottom, Mottram and Hollingworth was unbearable while the roadworks were taking place. The only answer is a bypass. There are two points that I hope the hon. Gentleman will address in his speech. First, the bypass, which go around Hollingworth as well as Mottram; that is the comprehensive solution we need. Secondly, we need the consultation to begin as soon as possible.

Andrew Bingham: I completely agree. Politically, the hon. Gentleman and I are miles apart, but on this matter we are in total agreement, as we will continue to be.

In 2010 the hon. Gentleman and I gathered together the key organisations and commissioned our own study, which we managed to get funded, to produce evidence that would confirm what we both knew to be obvious, as did the people of Glossop, Stalybridge and Hyde, which is that the situation then, as now, was unacceptable. The roads are simply not up to the needs of our residents. In the ensuing time we have pursued the matter relentlessly, both together and independently. That culminated in a meeting I had with the Chancellor at No. 11 Downing Street, during which I impressed on him the seriousness of the problem and how we could not ignore it any longer as it was only going to get worse.

In late 2014 I was delighted that, following our work, the Government announced the building of the Mottram Moor link road and the A57 link road, which is known locally as the Glossop spur. It was not the full solution that I have campaigned for—I will refer to that later—but we were promised that a study would be done to examine extending it to deal with the problems faced at Tintwistle in my constituency and Hollingworth in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. On that point, I strongly argue that the scheme should indeed be extended, along the lines of the original Mottram and Tintwistle bypass plan put forward years ago, because we need that for those two small villages.

I realise that the Minister will not have the intimate knowledge of the area that I do. I could embark on a long description of the road networks, the junctions and the geography, but by happy coincidence he will visit High Peak tomorrow, and I look forward to showing him the situation at first hand. Seeing it for himself will demonstrate the problem far better than any description I could give tonight. I would like to thank him in advance for visiting High Peak. Tonight I want to try to impress upon him a sense of the difficulties being faced, the impact they are having on my constituents and the urgency of the issue. In order to do that, I need to relate some of the happenings of the past few weeks.

The town of Glossop and the surrounding area are home to over 30,000 people. Despite being in the east midlands, Glossop very much faces Manchester and the north-west, for employment, leisure and many other facets of life. Consequently, there is a huge volume of traffic that heads in and through Glossop as people travel to, from and between Greater Manchester and Sheffield. There are only two effective roads heading north from Glossop to Manchester, one of which relies on a single-track bridge that was never designed to carry significant amounts of traffic. The fact that it is even considered by motorists, let alone used, proves the point I am making about the existing roads.
However, due to the congestion on the main route out of town, that route north has become a well-used alternative—until earlier this month, when a burst water main washed away the road surface in the village of Charlessworth, forcing its closure. The consequences were catastrophic. I received many emails from constituents, some of whom were leaving home well before dawn just to get out of Glossop and get to work for 9 am, and they were facing similar travel times when trying to get home. Indeed, when I was trying to get to Stalybridge one Friday evening I was forced to take a detour of several miles to complete the journey.

The closure of what is, in effect, only a back road pretty much gridlocked Glossop, and indeed the whole area, for over a week. I was informed that the chaos was such that a child who had suffered a seizure in Glossop and who needed an urgent ambulance faced an unacceptable delay, purely because of the blocked roads, so this catastrophic situation could easily have turned into a tragedy.

A further complication that week was the cancellation of trains, which meant that more cars went on to roads that were already overburdened. However, I must stress that the Minister should not think that last week's traffic problems were the cause of the problem; they were only the result of the contributory factors I have outlined, and they only exaggerated an already truly unacceptable situation.

Earlier this week, the M62 was blocked. Yet again, trans-Pennine traffic looking for an alternative route was forced on to the Woodhead Pass, which converges with the A57 just outside Glossop. The ensuing traffic chaos caused traffic jams going back huge distances, snaking through Tintwistle and several miles beyond.

I want to focus briefly on Tintwistle, which the Minister will visit tomorrow. A constituent, Vicky Mullis, who is a resident of Tintwistle, invited me to meet the village's residents to talk about the problems it faces. As the Minister will see tomorrow, they feel their houses physically shake as heavy goods vehicles thunder past, literally a few feet from their front doors. Furthermore, when the traffic backs up, as it did earlier this week, cars resort to taking short cuts through the village to try to get in front of the other traffic—they are using the roads as a rat run. I am trying to convince Derbyshire County Council, as the highways authority for those roads, to take action. Thus far, it seems somewhat impervious to my protestations, but I will continue.

That is why I still fully support looking at extending the proposed scheme. The scheme does much for Glossop and for parts of the constituency of the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde. However, it does nothing for Tintwistle, so the extension is as crucial as going ahead with the two link roads already in the programme.

There are more factors we can take into account when we consider the need for this solution. Significant planning consents have recently been granted in Glossop. That will increase the population and thereby increase traffic levels.

The imminent withdrawal of the 394 bus service from Glossop to Stepping Hill hospital in Stockport—I and my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) are trying to find ways to preserve the route—could move more constituents who have cars on to the roads. I could use more of the debate to talk about the 394 bus alone, because a lot of constituents are contacting me about it, and they are alarmed at the loss of that vital service. However, I want to return to the issue of traffic and to look at the economic consequences.

At the moment, a wide range of businesses operate in Glossop, covering various forms of industry, manufacturing and services, and we are always looking to attract more. However, the ongoing traffic difficulties are making it increasingly difficult to get businesses to open in Glossop. It is a thriving, fantastic town, and it is in a great position, but people are looking at it and thinking, “Hang on. How am I going to get my customers and clients in and out of the town?” They are now thinking twice about coming to Glossop and bringing in more jobs.

On top of that, I have spoken to companies based in Glossop that are really beginning to think that the traffic is suffocating the town. I fear that they will not only not get new businesses in, but lose the businesses we already have, because they will move elsewhere as a result of the inaccessibility.

On a wider point about the economy, the A628 Woodhead Pass is a significant route connecting the east and the west of the country. I applaud the Chancellor for his work on the northern powerhouse, and it is a great initiative, but for it to work properly the two ends of the powerhouse—the east and the west, Sheffield and Manchester—need to link up. The route-based strategy on the M62, which was produced some time ago, already flags up the fact that the M62 is nearing capacity. That increases the significance of the A628 as a trans-Pennine route. If we look at other trans-Pennine routes, we see that there is the A69 in the north and then the M62; the next one down is the A628. All this congestion is therefore blocking a vital artery connecting the east and the west, and I have a welter of statistics and evidence to prove that. I know the Minister will have seen it, because some of it comes from studies carried out by his own Department.

I have tried to encapsulate the situation as best I can in the time allowed. Much will become clearer tomorrow when the Minister visits, but I do want to impress on him the seriousness of the situation.

I am delighted that the Government agreed to build this road. It was announced in December 2014. The Prime Minister himself, in an answer to me at Prime Minister’s Question Time, confirmed that a future Conservative Government would build the road. I was delighted with that. I have that copy of Hansard pinned on my office wall to remind me what we have promised, and I intend to deliver on that promise if we can. However, the delight and expectations that were raised in late 2014 are turning into frustration because the wait goes on. In Glossop, it is now not just the Government’s reputation that is at stake; I have made a commitment to my constituents, and I am determined to stick to it. I keep repeating this, but I cannot stress it enough: I cannot begin to describe the groundswell of public opinion on this matter.

Many people across Glossop will be watching this debate tonight. They will watch it later on YouTube or whatever medium they want to use. Two constituents, Robert McColl and his son Kallen, have travelled down here specially to be in the Public Gallery to listen to this. Such is the desire of the people of Glossop to sort the problem out and sort it quickly. We know that one part
of the road is going to be built—the two relief roads. That is great, because we need that extended scheme for the people of Tintwistle and of Hollingworth in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde. I urge the Minister—I have known him for years, and he is a man of honour and integrity—to give my constituents, and indeed me, some hope that this process can be conducted quickly and with urgency so that we can see spades in the ground as soon as possible.

It is now quarter past 5 on a Thursday evening. If this was live on the radio, there would be people sat on the A57 and the A628, and sat around Glossop, listening to it, saying, “Minister, let’s hear what we want to hear. We need this road, we’re sat in this traffic, we’re starving the town, we’re starving High Peak.” I do not exaggerate: this is the biggest single issue facing the Glossopdale area. If it is not resolved, it will have catastrophic effects on everybody. The people of Glossop and I are desperate—we cannot carry on like this any longer.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Bingham): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) on securing this debate. He is a great champion for his constituency and has made his case with his customary eloquence and passion. I am thoroughly looking forward to visiting his area tomorrow morning.

Let me start by putting the transport agenda as a whole into some overall context. Transport really does boost our economy. It connects us, gives us more choice about where we work and live, and creates jobs. Well-maintained roads and motorways are an essential part of a modern vibrant economy. That is why in December 2014 the Government launched the road investment strategy, which outlines how £15.2 billion will be invested in our strategic roads between now and 2021. This is the biggest upgrade to our strategic roads in a generation.

The Department for Transport clearly recognises how important improved connectivity and better journeys are for Glossop and High Peak. That is why the road investment strategy contained several proposals in the area. Collectively, this package will address congestion and improve journey times between Manchester and Sheffield, as well issues to do with the safety and resilience of the route. The routes between Manchester and Sheffield provide a key connection between two of our most important northern cities, and Glossop is a key town on that route.

Currently the journey times and the performance of the connecting roads compare most unfavourably against similar routes. It is not just Glossop we must consider, but Mottram, Hollingworth and Tintwistle, which are also heavily dependent on the A57 and A628. I understand that elements of the route, particularly the A628, experience delays and have a poor safety record, impacting on the communities on the route and on the environment of the Peak District national park as a whole. The communities in High Peak endure high levels of traffic throughout the day and consequently suffer unduly from air pollution and noise. Economic activity in the area, as my hon. Friend has so eloquently said, is also inhibited by the lack of capacity on the roads.

The proposals in the road investment strategy will improve conditions for Glossop and Mottram. Highways England is exploring how the benefits might also be extended to Hollingworth and Tintwistle. I will personally take up the issue with Highways England and make sure that it sees a transcript of this debate and hears the concerns expressed so eloquently by my hon. Friend.

The direct route by road from Glossop to Manchester is principally the A57 and, for a 5-mile-long section, the M67. The section of the A57 used to reach the M67 is an entirely single-lane highway that passes through the very busy town of Mottram. In the other direction to Sheffield, the A57 winds its way through the Peak District national park along the appropriately named Snake Road or Snake Pass. The A57 in both directions is busy throughout the day and, given that it features extensive lengths of single-lane road, is extremely vulnerable to delays caused by congestion or accidents that can block it. Given the location, the A57 is also very vulnerable to adverse weather conditions.

Anybody who lives in the midlands or the north of England will know that there have been long-standing calls for improvements to connectivity. We have heard those calls and have provided a package of proposals that will significantly improve the road journey between Manchester and South Yorkshire.

Andrew Bingham: The Minister has talked at length about the A57, but will he also mention the A628, particularly the Woodhead Pass, which people will have heard of because the traffic is always being mentioned on the radio? The A628 converges with the A57 just outside Glossop and is another significant trans-Pennine route that goes to Barnsley. For those travelling on the M1 from the south, the signpost to Manchester will guide them to the A628, which then converges with the A57.

Andrew Jones: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. Indeed, I plan to use the A628 to reach him tomorrow morning. I have already planned my route, so I understand his point.

We recognise that the routes need substantial improvement to meet the needs of the local economy and the environment and better to fulfil their role in our national transport network. That relates to trans-Pennine connectivity and we should not forget that, as well as serving local communities and businesses, the routes also play a broader national role.

The trans-Pennine upgrade programme seeks to improve journeys through a number of schemes, including a new dual carriageway creating a Mottram Moor link road; a new single carriageway link from Mottram Moor to Brookfield; further dualling on the A61; and climbing lanes on the A628. A number of other smaller measures will also be put in place to address the accident blackspots. We are very aware of the specific environmental protections that are in place in and around those locations, including special areas of conservation and sites of special scientific interest. We will, therefore, work closely with the national park authority.

For any proposals to go ahead, they will need to be sensitively designed and their potential impacts will have to be properly assessed and understood so that the improvements are in keeping with the significance of the park’s protected landscape. As part of the process...
of developing and delivering the investment, consultation will take place with local communities and stakeholders. That will include the scope and viability of further improvements and extensions to the Mottram Moor link road that would alleviate the issues faced in Tintwistle and Hollingworth. Highways England has been developing options for each of those schemes, to determine how best to meet the transport needs of the local communities while addressing environmental and other concerns. That balance needs to be achieved. Early consultation with key stakeholders such as the local authorities, utilities companies and the Peak District national park authority is already informing the development and assessment of the options.

I anticipate that a full public consultation will commence in April 2017, and the next step would be to submit an application for a development consent order in summer or early autumn 2018.

Jonathan Reynolds: In addition to the Minister’s visit tomorrow, he will probably find in his red box a letter from me, saying that we would be extremely grateful if he would consider bringing forward the public consultation to the end of 2016. I know he is not be able to do so, but it would generate so much good will and make the project proceed faster, which would be tremendous.

Andrew Jones: I give an undertaking to both Members who are present that I will do all I can to achieve that. They have made their case eloquently. I recognise the issues that are faced by the local communities that they represent, and we will do all we can to help.

In terms of timing, I expect that after the development consent order, we will commence construction in the financial year 2019-20, and the schemes will potentially be open for traffic three years later. I recognise the case for urgency that has been a clear theme this evening, so if it is possible to bring the dates forward, I will certainly try to do so.

The new schemes will follow recent investment that we have already made in the network. As a result of resurfacing schemes undertaken in recent years, the condition of the road surface on the A628 and the A57 has improved since 2010, resulting in a 68% reduction in the number of potholes. Works are taking place, but I recognise that we are looking at more significant, longer-term answers.

In addition to the commitments in the road investment strategy, the Department is undertaking a study on improving connections between Manchester and Sheffield by way of a trans-Pennine tunnel. Through that study, we seek to understand the viability, costs and deliverability of such a connection, and to determine its role and priority in the emerging transport strategy for the north. The construction of such a connection carries with it the potential to reduce traffic on existing routes in the area and to bring important environmental benefits to the Peak District national park.

The initial report of the trans-Pennine tunnel study was published on 30 November last year. It found that there is a clear strategic case for the scheme that is aligned with central and subnational government policy, and that the construction of a new strategic route between Manchester and Sheffield is technically feasible, although very challenging. The scale of the wider economic benefit has yet to be established, but initial analysis shows that the benefit could be significant and complementary to other schemes in the developing northern powerhouse strategy. The study’s final report will be published by the end of the year, and will be used to inform the content of our second road investment strategy.

Transport includes more than just roads, so I hope my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak will not mind if I talk a little about rail in the area. As part of the proposed northern hub capacity enhancement, Network Rail has proposed works at the eastern end of the Hope Valley line. A passing loop is to be provided east of Bamford, and the line is to be redoubled at Dore and Totley station.

Andrew Bingham: That work is very welcome to certain parts of the area, but, given the geography of High Peak, the work will not help anything on the Glossop side of the hill, because it is on the wrong side. The Minister will see that tomorrow.

Andrew Jones: I recognise that, and I look forward to seeing the detail of the geography and the challenges it presents. The challenge that we face with rail is that we have an enormous backlog of investment. The rail industry is a huge success, but that huge success brings with it the need for more capacity. There are as many people using our rail network now as there were in the late 1920s, but the network is only a fraction of the size. Governments of all colours have underinvested over many years, and we need to catch up. That is what the control period peak budget of £38 billion is about. I will take forward my hon. Friend’s point about where that work can be carried out on the Hope Valley line, and I will liaise with Network Rail on that. Rail is a key ingredient in improving connectivity in many areas. Although we are investing very heavily, we also require investment where the Hope Valley line enters the big conurbations in Manchester and Sheffield. We must also bear in mind the impact that High Speed 2 will have on such key connections.

Network Rail’s intention is to enable an increase in passenger services between Manchester and Sheffield and to improve accessibility by sustainable transport to the Peak District national park. A public inquiry into Network Rail’s application for statutory powers to undertake the scheme opens in Dore on 10 May. The independent inquiry inspector will then submit a report and recommendation to the Department for Transport. It is not therefore appropriate for me to comment any further on the scheme.

In summary, I hope I have demonstrated that this Government are committed to improving roads and transport infrastructure around Glossop and High Peak. We have made a commitment in the road investment strategy to make significant improvements to the trans-Pennine route through this area in the next few years. These enhancements to transport infrastructure will bring benefits to residents and improve the economy across the region. Such enhancements will help not only the economy, but the local community and the local environment. All those elements, which were highlighted very clearly and passionately in my hon. Friend’s speech, will be benefited by that work.
I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and other hon. Members to make sure we get the schemes right. The point is that, as we are working in this area, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We are making a step change to travel in the area, and we need to make sure we get this right. The more local input we have, the better such decisions will be. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend to improve the situation for his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

5.31 pm

House adjourned.
The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose) said: Just to clarify, the figures are a little unclear, as my hon. Friend says. It looks as though about 2 million may be eligible to vote at the moment, and another 3 million or 4 million on top of that might be enfranchised were we to get rid of the 15-year rule in due course. However, as I suggested, all figures should be treated with a degree of caution, because this is so uncertain.

Mr Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. What he is saying is that, of the 2 million who are eligible at the moment, we registered only 100,000, and many fewer than that actually voted. There is potentially a pool of a lot more who could be registered if the Bill went through and we were able to allow all British citizens living overseas to participate in our democracy.

That, of course, is what happens in a lot of other countries. Some of those countries organise—indeed, facilitate—voting by their overseas citizens at embassies, consulates and other such places. In the recent Turkish elections, the President of Turkey, in a neutral capacity, spent a lot of time visiting other countries in Europe—mainly countries with a significant number of Turkish expatriates—to speak directly to them to encourage them to participate in the election.

So what would be the benefit of this? Apart from the benefit to democracy, it would assist in campaigns such as one that I very strongly support, which is the campaign for an end to the discrimination against British pensioners living overseas. It would mean that those who are campaigning to ensure that there is equal treatment between British pensioners living overseas and those living in the United Kingdom would have more clout. At the moment, there are a handful of these people in each constituency able to vote, and they cannot really make a difference in the general election, but if more of them were eligible to vote, and did vote, they would be able to lobby much more effectively and we might find that the Government were more responsive to their concerns than they seem to be at the moment.

Mr Hollobone: The campaigns that my hon. Friend is mounting for electoral justice and pensioner justice are legendary. I am glad that he managed to persuade the Government to include in the manifesto a commitment on electoral justice. With regard to British pensioners living overseas, presumably Her Majesty’s Government know who these people are and where they live, and they are in receipt of at least some element of their pension. Therefore, given the terms of this Bill, it should not be too difficult for the Electoral Commission to put them on the list and get them registered.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend makes a really good point; as he says, it should not be too difficult. In the run-up to the previous election, I encouraged the Foreign Office to try to get people registered. I also tried to get information out of the Department for Work and Pensions about enabling it to communicate directly with pensioners. The 15-year rule makes it more difficult to run these registration campaigns, because the DWP does not know whether an overseas pensioner has been living overseas for more than 15 years, and removing the rule would make it much easier for it to campaign effectively.

When I was at a meeting discussing these issues with a member of our embassy staff in Berlin, he told me of the efforts being made to try to get expats living there to participate in voting, and I am sure that such efforts were made. However, as is apparent from the figures, there is an enormously long way to go. When my
hon. Friend the Minister responds, I am sure he will say that this Bill is premature, as most of my Bills are, but I hope he will also say what the Government are going to do about implementing their manifesto commitment.

It is currently a cause of a great deal of frustration for British overseas residents that they are going to find it very difficult to participate in the European referendum. Some cynics have said that it would be better if we did not allow large numbers from overseas to participate in that referendum, but I think it would be desirable for the maximum number of British citizens to be able to do so. After all, we are going to allow Commonwealth citizens and Irish citizens living in this country to participate, so why were the Government unable to bring forward the Bill to facilitate the extension of the 15-year rule sooner in this Session so that it could have had a part to play in the referendum eligibility campaign?

Mr Hollobone: Surely the whole point about electoral registration is that we register people who we believe have the right to cast their ballot. We never register people on the basis of which way we think they might vote in a particular election or referendum.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Too often, we allow cynics outside to misrepresent our policy positions. I think that all democrats would say that the maximum number of British citizens should be entitled to vote and encouraged to participate in our democracy, and that, in essence, is what this Bill is about.

Clause 3 deals with internet voting. This is a controversial subject, but I think that if we are ever to go down the road of internet voting, the starting point should be people living overseas.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): My hon. Friend and I have been very close friends for some while, but I am concerned that internet voting could be open to fraud. How would he seek to deal with that issue?

Mr Chope: Fraud is rife in most electronic transactions, but despite that, a very large number of people are prepared to trust their banking arrangements to being dealt with online. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is now going to make it more or less compulsory for small businesses to do their tax returns online on a quarterly basis. My hon. Friend makes a perfect reasonable point; there is always scope for fraud. That is why I would not suggest massive internet voting on a universal basis from the outset, but it would be sensible to start off with a reasonable experiment. For example, we could perhaps start with members of our armed forces who are serving overseas. We might be able to develop a secure system for dealing with them.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman not think it odd that he wants to make it a lot easier for people living abroad to vote, but this Government want to make it a lot more difficult, through individual registration, for people to register to vote in this country?

Mr Chope: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s premise. The Government are keen to ensure that we have individual voter registration so that there is less identity fraud at polling stations and through postal votes. I supported that when I was a member of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in the previous Parliament.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We are not debating UK domestic issues. I know the hon. Gentleman would not want to drift away from his point.

Mr Chope: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I am intrigued by his proposition on internet voting. As a fellow member of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in the previous Parliament, I can bear testament to his prowess and knowledge. He rightly mentioned utilising the armed forces in an experiment on overseas voting. Perhaps Skyping could be used as a method, because face recognition on computers is now very sophisticated; indeed, we use it in airports across this country and in Europe. Does he agree that this could be a way ahead for internet voting by armed forces in overseas territories?

Mr Chope: I have to admit to not being an expert in this area at all. If my children were here, they would say to me, “When did you last Skype?”, and the answer would be, “Never.” I know that there is such a thing as Skyping, that other members of my family participate in it, and that it is a very inexpensive way of communicating with friends and family overseas. I imagine that it would fall within the term “internet voting”. However, I do not have the expertise to be able to answer my hon. Friend’s question about whether it would be possible to secure a system of Skyping that would be proof against fraud or misrepresentations. I leave that to the Minister and his officials.

In clause 3 I do not try to set out a prescriptive arrangement for internet voting. That is because this is a really good example of where regulations should be brought forward by the Government using their expertise rather than relying on albeit gifted amateurs to do the job for them. The clause says that the Government “shall bring forward regulations”, and, in subsection (2), that they “shall include provisions to prevent identity fraud and to ensure that only those eligible to vote can vote.”

Mr Hollobone: I anticipate that clause 3 might cause most difficulty when the Bill goes into Committee. Is it not the case that it has never been easier to register an individual to vote and that increasingly that is being done over the internet? That will be of great encouragement to overseas voters, because they should be easily able to register themselves in this country.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Clause 3 addresses internet voting rather than internet registration, which is an important distinction. It is already possible to register on the internet, which, as my hon. Friend says, is a popular form of registration. A lot of young people used the internet to get themselves on the electoral register in the run-up to the last general election. This is a short and relatively simple and straightforward Bill, and I commend it to the House.
9.50 am

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) on promoting this Bill. I for one appreciate his determination, having promoted a similar Bill last year. Like that Bill, this one has three main provisions. First, it would require the Electoral Commission to register overseas voters; secondly, it would remove the limit on how long British people can live overseas before they lose the right to vote; thirdly, it would allow internet voting for overseas voters.

It is good that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues are so eager to make progress on internet voting, but the Trade Union Bill, which is currently passing through the Lords, shows that the Government are wholly opposed to any suggestion of internet voting for the trade union movement. I say that merely as a point of clarification.

I recognise the hon. Gentleman's interest in extending the franchise and in modernising the electoral system. However, given the Conservative party's record on excluding voters through the rushed implementation of individual electoral registration and, indeed, its opposition to votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, I am somewhat perplexed that he has not done more to challenge his party on those particular issues.

Labour consistently warned the Government of the dangers of removing the last Labour Government's safeguards for the introduction of IER. We also warned of the dangers of bringing forward the date of the point of transition—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. As I said earlier, unfortunately this is about overseas voters. I can understand that we want to go over different ways of voting, but we have to remain on the issue of overseas voting. That is what the Bill is about.

Ian Lavery: That is absolutely first-class advice, Mr Deputy Speaker. On the parliamentary process and attempts to get individuals to vote, the latest Office for National Statistics figures and Electoral Commission data, which were published only this week and are really important, show that more than 1.4 million people have fallen off the electoral register since the introduction of IER.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am trying to be as helpful as I can. If the hon. Gentleman could combine that point with the number of overseas voters who have not been registered—that is the issue—and compare the two, that would be a way forward.

Ian Lavery: As ever, I accept your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wish I did have the figures for those living abroad, but, as has been said, it is very difficult to ascertain them. The only figures we have are those for individual voters in the UK, but I fully accept and understand what you have said.

Elections in May will include those to the devolved institutions in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh, the London mayoral election, and the police and crime commissioner elections in England and Wales. Then—just in case somebody has missed this—at the end of June we will have a rather serious referendum to decide whether this country will continue to be a member of the European Union. The Electoral Commission will play an important role overseeing all those elections. Personally, I do not think it would be wise for this House to say that, in addition, the commission should make the registration of overseas voters a priority. I hope and expect that the commission will continue its grand efforts of previous years in encouraging British people living overseas to register to vote, which is so important, but if there is to be a priority, surely it must be to ensure that all prospective voters who live in the UK are on the list.

The figures I have cited are alarming, but I will not mention them again, for fear of being pulled up by you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is important, however, to recognise the changes taking place in our democracy. We have to understand that the voting process is a central plank of our democratic process, both at home and abroad.

Clause 2 proposes abolishing the current 15-year limit on an overseas voter's ability to participate in UK elections. We have no objection to reviewing the time limits on eligibility. There is nothing sacred about the 15-year limit. It has not always been 15 years: it has been 20 years and five years in the past, but now it has settled at 15 years. As the hon. Gentleman has said, there are different rules in different countries. However, if we are to consider changing the limit, or even removing it completely, as has been argued, I do not believe that that should be done in isolation. It should happen as part of a wider review of how we can increase participation in elections in general.

The Conservative party made a manifesto commitment to abolishing the 15-year rule, and we are still waiting for the votes for life Bill to be introduced. Although we have no objection to that in principle, if we want to extend the franchise the Government should look again at giving the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds in this country. We should learn the lesson of what happened in Scotland, which enthused people and brought them into the parliamentary process. They felt that they were valued. We should take a leaf out of the Scottish book.

Clause 3 would give overseas voters a chance to vote online. We need to do more to make sure that our electoral process better reflects the busy lives that people lead. That could and should include trialling electronic and online voting. However, I am not wholly convinced by the hon. Gentleman's arguments about why overseas voters should be the first to try out such a system.

We are unable to support the Bill, for the reasons I have given. I am sceptical of some of the clauses and the priority given to overseas voters, because of all our other concerns about electoral matters.

Mr Chope: I understand that this is the hon. Gentleman's maiden Front-Bench speech on a Friday; he is making a very good fist of it, if I may say so. He says that he does not believe the Bill to be a priority, but does he not think there is something really wrong with our democracy if some 6 million British citizens are not able to participate in it? Surely that should be a top priority.

Ian Lavery: I fully understand that, but I would not categorise it as a priority. Some 7.5 million people in the UK are not registered, and since the introduction of IER a further 1.4 million people have dropped off the register. The Opposition fully agree that we need to look at encouraging participation in voting, but we do not see overseas voting as a major priority. It should be part of a concerted effort to get as many people as we
can to vote. I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman and I are too far apart on that, other than on the question of what should be a priority.

David Morris: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his first occasion at the Dispatch Box for the Opposition. Is the Opposition’s standpoint that they would like to see internet voting come online in the mainstream, not only in the UK but abroad?

Ian Lavery: The Labour party’s position is that we would like to investigate the potential for that. As I have just said, it is important to remember that people have busy lives and they work. As well as online voting, there are other options that we would like to look at, which could play a major role. We have to try to open it up. Perhaps we need to look at polling day. Why is it on a Thursday from 7 am until 10 pm? How long has that been the case? It is generally accepted across the Chamber that we need to look at more innovative ways to encourage people—whether overseas or in this country—to vote and to take part in the democratic process. I do not think the hon. Gentleman and I are too far apart on those issues. It is perhaps, as I mentioned to the hon. Member for Christchurch, just a case of why one should be a priority and others not.

We need to look at the question collectively and try to come up with a way to encourage people to get out there and vote. As politicians, that is really what we want. There are 5.5 million British citizens living abroad, and I think the hon. Gentleman said that only 100,000 of them were registered to vote. To be honest, the figure that I have is 20,000, so it was news to me that that number had somehow multiplied by five. I am encouraged by that, but we need to encourage people into the process, and we can do that together across parties.

John Penrose: On a point of clarification, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the figure was closer to 20,000 about a year or a year and a half ago, before the last general election. In the run-up to the last general election, a huge effort was made to drive up the level of overseas registration, and it was pretty successful. The trouble was that we went from an absurdly low level of overseas registration, and it was pretty successful. The figure that we need to look at more innovative ways to encourage people—whether overseas or in this country—to vote and to take part in the democratic process. I do not think the hon. Gentleman and I are too far apart on those issues. It is perhaps, as I mentioned to the hon. Member for Christchurch, just a case of why one should be a priority and others not.

We need to look at the question collectively and try to come up with a way to encourage people to get out there and vote. As politicians, that is really what we want. There are 5.5 million British citizens living abroad, and I think the hon. Gentleman said that only 100,000 of them were registered to vote. To be honest, the figure that I have is 20,000, so it was news to me that that number had somehow multiplied by five. I am encouraged by that, but we need to encourage people into the process, and we can do that together across parties.

Ian Lavery: The right hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point, which was also raised by the hon. Member for Christchurch. If we are to look at an alternative means of voting in whatever type of election, it has got to be copper bottomed. It has got to be so secure that it contains no mechanism for failure. It is an innovative idea and a new vision, but we have got to get it right. People feel more secure now about internet banking and lots of other things that they do on the internet, and they have to feel secure if they are to participate in that way. It is really important that we get security right from day one.

As I mentioned, the hon. Member for Christchurch is to be congratulated on raising these issues, many of which will undoubtedly come back to the House in time. In reality, the Government do not have a good record when it comes to making changes to our democracy, and with the changes to the parliamentary boundaries, I fear that that record will only deteriorate. However, as I have explained, we in the Opposition should look to work together with the Minister and his colleagues in a cross-party way to ensure that when people go to vote, they feel that they are participating in a genuinely open and fair process.

10.5 am

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I rise to support the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope). I am grateful to him for allowing my name to appear as one of his supporters on the back page. I commend him for his excellent speech, but I want to condemn his remark that he feels as though his Bill is premature, because I do not think it is premature at all. He has introduced the Bill to advance a manifesto commitment in a week in which the Government seem to have backtracked on several manifesto commitments, especially with regard to our pledges on the renegotiation of our settlement with the European Union. I congratulate him on the fact that his Bill is commendably short and therefore highly understandable and digestible for everyone.

Sir Greg Knight: Is my hon. Friend aware that support for the Bill goes beyond the list of names that are printed on the back of it?

Mr Hollobone: My right hon. Friend demonstrates that by his presence here today. I know that the subject of the Bill is being talked about in the pubs and clubs of Yorkshire, and he has brought the concerns of the people of Yorkshire to the House. On the south coast, where my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch comes from, the subject is the talk of the town. It is an extremely serious issue. The figures that my hon. Friend has revealed to the House will shock the nation.

Oliver Colvile: I have been down to the south of France quite a bit to talk to members of Conservatives Abroad. Believe me, this is quite a big issue for them.

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend’s speaking tour of the continent is famous, and I am sure will become legendary as time goes on. I have to disappoint him, however, because hedgehogs are not included in the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I hope that the hon. Gentleman is talking about continental hedgehogs or world hedgehogs, not UK hedgehogs; otherwise he is going off the subject.
Mr Hollobone: Hedgehogs overseas will not be eligible for registration, but I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) is committed to the issue of overseas voter registration, as I am. He will share my shock, on behalf of our constituents, at the figures that have been revealed to the House today. Will the Minister be kind enough to intervene on me in a moment to give us the total number of electors in this country, so that we can establish the proportion represented by the 6 million potential overseas voters as a percentage of the total UK electorate?

John Penrose: I think the figure is roughly 44 million. If I get more precise divine inspiration, I may help my hon. Friend out a little more, but it is that sort of ballpark figure.

Mr Hollobone: I am most grateful for that intervention, and that is the sort of figure that I had in mind. We are now aware that there are potentially 6 million British voters, in addition to the 44 million who are currently registered, who could take part in UK general elections but who are unable to do so because they are not registered. That is a shockingly large figure, and I am surprised that the Government are not giving the issue more priority. Surely, with our traditions of empire and of spreading good government and democracy around the world, we would at the very least want to encourage those 6 million British citizens who are living abroad to retain their franchise in this country and their ability to participate democratically in the future of what is still their nation. I think the nation would be very surprised by the fact that there are 6 million people living abroad whom most of us would like to take part in UK elections.

Clause 1 of this excellent Bill would enable those 6 million British citizens to take part only in “United Kingdom Parliamentary elections if they were registered to vote”.

Although the provision is fantastic, I would want to take it further. It seems to me that it is important that British citizens living abroad should be able to take part in local government and mayoral elections if they want to do so. At the moment, an EU citizen living in this country quite rightly cannot take part in UK parliamentary elections, or at least they cannot do so yet—that may change if we decide to remain in the European Union—but they can take part in local government elections. It seems to me that British citizens, whether they live in this country or abroad, should be able to participate in all elections at every level of the democratic franchise. If I had the good fortune to end up on the Public Bill Committee, I would seek to amend clause 1(a) to extend the franchise to local government elections.

Oliver Colvile: Does my hon. Friend not recognise that local government is about delivering local services? If people do not physically live in the place where those public services are delivered, it seems to me rather strange for them to vote in local elections.

Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. However, overseas voters do not physically live in this country, but that does not mean that they are not interested in its future direction. It is true that they do not receive specific local government services where they last lived, but they would still be interested in the future direction of their former local area. Many overseas voters also have close family relatives living in the same local government area.

That leads me to another point, which is about where overseas voters should be registered. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch will have received, as I and I am sure most Members have received, correspondence from British pensioners living overseas about the fact that they are not entitled to the full uprating of the state pension in some countries, which is an extremely important issue. I always go back to those who contact me to ask, “Can you tell me if you were previously a resident in Kettering, because I am not sure why you’re contacting me?” For those who say that they used to live in Kettering and give me their former address, I have been very happy to take up their cause with the appropriate Minister. When overseas voters are registered, it is very important that they are registered in the last place they lived in this country. It should not be too difficult to ensure that the system works in that way.

Hon. Members have spoken about clause 3. I have concerns about internet voting. However, it is quite clear that it has never been easier to enter oneself on the electoral register on the internet, and that should be encouraged for British citizens living overseas.

I was interested in the remarks of the Labour spokesman, the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery). I congratulate him on his debut performance on the Front Bench. How refreshing it is to see that a man of his calibre—he is closer than most of his colleagues to the beating heart of the Labour party outside the Chamber—has made his way on to the Front Bench. It seems to me that there is hope for the Labour party when Members of his quality can represent it in that way, and I think that trend should be encouraged.

On all these electoral issues, we must make sure that as many people as possible who should be able to vote actually end up doing so. We should not try to predict which way people are going to vote on any particular issue. The important point is that British overseas voters should be able to fulfil their civic duty in retaining their right to participate in the British franchise. The Bill seeks to encourage that. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is not premature in bringing forward the Bill. I hope that the Government will respond positively to his crusade for electoral justice, and I am sure we all look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): I join in the chorus of congratulations for my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) on introducing the Bill. I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) that it is not necessarily premature. I prefer the adjectives “forward-thinking” and “far-sighted”, if I may put it that way, because my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is absolutely right to observe that it was a manifesto commitment at the recent general election.

My hon. Friend is therefore heading in a direction that we would wholeheartedly endorse. I will take issue with the details of how he proposes to do it—I have
concerns about the practicalities—but we are absolutely on the same page about the principle and about not dilly-dallying and shilly-shallying, or generally not according it a high priority. I want to reassure him that a great deal of work is going on at the moment. I can tell him that parliamentary draftsmen are even now beaVERing away at high speed on a Bill with all sorts of different possible working titles, including the overseas electors Bill and the overseas voters Bill. We are definitely not hanging around; we are moving forward with it. As he will appreciate—he will be more aware of this than most, having introduced this private Member’s Bill—many important details need to be got right if we are to enfranchise this important group. My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering is quite right to observe that this is a tremendously important extension of our franchise that will in many cases extend democratic rights to those whom people would think or expect to have the vote.

I should say up front that I was delighted to hear that the Labour party is very happy at least to consider, and has no objection to reviewing, the question of whether the rule should be set at 15 years. The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) is absolutely right to observe that other countries set that time limit at different points. In fact, our country has set it at different dates in the past, so there is not necessarily a right or a wrong moment. The figure of 15 years is quite arbitrary, so I am encouraged by the fact that he is willing to participate constructively in a review.

Oliver Colvile: I thank my hon. Friend for saying that the Government wish to introduce such a Bill, but what is his timetable for producing legislation that might support much of what our hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) is proposing?

John Penrose: I am afraid that I must fall back on the response “in due course”, to use that timeworn parliamentary phrase, rather than give my hon. Friend a firm date. However, I assure him that work is going on right now and that we are not hanging around. I will have to leave it at that, but I hope to be able to provide further clarity—in due course.

Mr Hollobone: I am enjoying the Minister’s speech hugely and I am encouraged by what he has said so far. Will he do the House a service by placing the 15-year limit in context? We have not yet heard where it comes from, who imposed it and why. There is growing consensus that it needs to be abolished.

John Penrose: As the hon. Member for Wansbeck acknowledged, the 15-year rule is a bit of a hybrid. The limit has been as low as five years and as high as 20 years. Successive Governments have extended it or narrowed it over time. I do not want to be too specific about its history. The point behind the observation of my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering is that, because the line has been moved about several times under successive Governments, it is inherently arbitrary to choose a particular length of time that people have been away. The Government made a manifesto commitment to enfranchise all British citizens, no matter how long they have been abroad, because we think that choosing 15 years, as opposed to 14 or 16 years, is inherently like sticking a dart in a dartboard. We need to say that if British citizens maintain British citizenship that brings with it rights, obligations and a connection with this country, and that that should endure.

I am encouraged by the Labour party’s view. I welcome the fact that it is willing to embark on a review of the 15-year rule. I also welcome the hon. Member for Wansbeck’s comments about the need for a cross-party approach to driving up registration among all under-represented groups, regardless of where they live—whether they are resident in the UK or abroad. He is absolutely right to point out that there are a succession of groups who are less represented and less registered than others. His colleague, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), wrote to me recently about students. They are one of the less well-represented groups. Some black and minority ethnic communities are also less well represented. Ex-patriots are the worst of all in terms of the percentage of rates of registration—down at about 5%, as we have heard from earlier speeches. They are probably the least well represented of all the under-represented groups.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and others made the point that we cannot—we would all, as politicians or democrats, be diminished if we did—proceed purely on the basis of narrow party political advantage. It is far better, as the hon. Member for Wansbeck observed, to proceed on the basis of what is right for democracy. We must proceed on a cross-party basis without working out which particular groups might be more likely to favour his party or mine. If we all drive up registration in all groups on that basis, we will improve our democratic credentials and reduce voter cynicism very dramatically. That cynicism is perhaps one of the more corrosive influences not just in reducing levels of voter registration but levels of voter turnout—people who are registered but choose not to exercise their vote. We are all familiar with that problem, and cynicism about politics, the political process and politicians is a key driver of it.

One thing we are trying to do, in improving both the registration process and the reasons for encouraging people to register, is to make registration more convenient, simpler, easier, cheaper and more efficient—what we call the plumbing of registration. We want to make it less of a hassle to get registered.

Sir Greg Knight: Will the Minister confirm to the House that he is not looking at the possibility of introducing an Australian-type requirement that people have to vote?

John Penrose: I am happy to confirm that to my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right. That has not been part of our democratic tradition in this country. It could, of course, be decided and introduced after debate, but it was not in our party’s manifesto and it is not part of our current plans.

Mr Hollobone: On registration, a point I have made many times—it fell on deaf ears in the coalition Government; I hope that will not be the case today—is that those in almost all under-represented groups will have had some contact or multiple contacts with Government agencies of one sort or another, whether in relation to benefits, passports, applications for this or
applications for that. Why can we not have a simple cross-governmental rule that every time somebody comes into contact with a Government agency they are asked the question, “Are you on the electoral register?” If the answer is no, they could then be told how to register.

**John Penrose:** My hon. Friend gave a good example with regard to pensions, saying that the Department for Work and Pensions will inevitably have a list of people to whom it is paying pensions. That one cogent example should therefore allow an opportunity to provide the kind of nudge he talks about. I can confirm that we have trialled a series of links on various Government website pages to do what he describes. We are currently investigating whether that can be extended more broadly across more Government services, so that any time anybody living abroad or in a domestic under-represented group comes into contact with the British state we can provide a nudge for them to get registered. We are looking at that extremely carefully, as it seems like it could be a very sensible way of proceeding. It may not be the whole answer—in some cases it may not be a very effective answer and in others it may be highly effective—but it is certainly something we want to pursue.

**Oliver Colville:** As my hon. Friend may know, I represent a naval garrison city with a large military presence. How can we ensure that more military personnel are registered? I have to say that I have found registration levels to be very disappointing.

**John Penrose:** Special registration arrangements for service personnel and Crown servants are already in place. Special registration systems allow them to register in a slightly different, and I hope more convenient, way than other ex-patriots living in other parts of the world.

What we have encountered, not only in relation to service personnel and Crown servants but other ex-patriots, is that for those people living abroad who are registered to vote and have also enrolled for a postal vote, which they need to do as well, the two processes are not necessarily as linked up as they might be. They may be registered to vote but not automatically registered for a postal vote, even if they thought they were. Sometimes postal vote forms have arrived too late, depending on where they are in the world and the efficiency of the postal service. What we have tried to do more recently, therefore, is change the guidelines, in conjunction with the Electoral Commission, to ensure that postal vote forms are sent out earlier, with sufficient postage on them and so on, and that the overseas postal vote forms can in future be sent out among the earliest batches in each local constituency to make sure that the chances of them arriving in time in every part of the world are maximised. All those measures will help to drive up both registration rates and voting rates.

This issue is not just about the plumbing of registration and voting. Those things are important and I am sure we can make significant improvements to them and get more people in under-represented groups to register and, with any luck, help them to vote. This is not just about plumbing; however, it is also about poetry. There are some groups who are not registered, not because it is inconvenient or because they have not got around to it, but because they view the political process with cynicism or suspicion. Again, this is where a cross-party approach to try to enthuse, convince and persuade people that the answer to their cynicism about the way politics and the democratic process works is to get involved, not to avoid the whole process. If one party tried to do that on its own, it would be far less effective than if we joined hands. Indeed, it is not just up to politicians. We need to join hands not just across the political spectrum but with civic society groups right the way across the spectrum. We are already doing some of those things. Incidentally, the Electoral Commission is also trying to work in this fashion, too. I welcome the Labour party’s offer of a cross-party approach. I absolutely and would dearly like to pursue that with it if I can. I have already mentioned this to the hon. Member for Wansbeck’s Opposition Front-Bench colleague. The hon. Member for Ashfield is not here today, but she and I have had conversations in the past. It is absolutely the right way to go.

The Electoral Commission understands the importance of not just the plumbing but the poetry, if I may use that analogy. For example, it announced in the course of the past week a collaboration with the writers of “Hollyoaks”. I understand—I hope I am not acting as a terrible plot-spoiler here, Mr Deputy Speaker—that they intend to blend through the storyline of that soap an encouragement to register and information about why it is important to register, how to register and so on. That is something I would hope we all support.

**Oliver Colville:** Does my hon. Friend also recognise that “The Archers”, and not just “Hollyoaks”, has a significant part to play? It is a very good soap opera, and would it not be wonderful were it to start talking about people abroad?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** I think it is time I joined in. Whatever we do, we are not going around the soaps. We are talking about overseas registration, not plots about registration in the UK.

**John Penrose:** You are absolutely right, Mr Deputy Speaker, although I would observe that many of these soaps are also watched by overseas and expatriate voters living abroad, but I shall move on before I try your patience any further.

The Bill also deals with internet voting, which is potentially a very important area. It is interesting that we all increasingly take for granted the use of the internet for more and more things. If someone said 10 years ago that a large proportion of us—if not yet a majority—would be using internet banking or shopping, people would have been very surprised, yet here we are, and it is increasingly a part of normal life in this country. If online voting is not already happening—some, like my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, are already asking the question—it will certainly start to happen in due course. People will start to ask, “Why can we not vote online?” The trade union movement has already asked the question, while other organisations are starting to use internet voting for some issues.

That said, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville) rightly asked about the fraud issue, and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch has built this into clause 3. There is an important point here about fraud prevention. While we are increasingly used to online banking and shopping, and those sorts of things, if, in those cases, something goes wrong, broadly speaking, the bank or credit or
debate, or whoever it might be—will usually stand behind the transaction and take the risk from the consumer. That is perfectly acceptable for commercial transactions. The difficulty is that it is extremely hard to work out whether a vote has been intercepted and potentially subverted—switched from a vote for Labour to a vote for the Conservative party, or from an aye to a no in a referendum—especially given that we have secret ballots, which are an essential part of our democracy. At the same time, the stakes could not be higher. Clearly, stealing the government of a country is an incredibly serious issue, and one that would be extremely hard to unpick afterwards, in the way we can unpick a faulty commercial transaction, make good the money and undertake a forensic analysis.

I am not saying we do not expect online voting to happen in due course, but I believe that the fraud issues are not yet resolved. I am sure that the technology will continue to advance and be ready at some point, and that we will have a robust and transparently solid political and democratic process that will allow this to happen, but we are not yet there. However, given the way the world is moving—it is happening in more and more areas of our lives—it would be a brave man who said it will never happen, even if, like my hon. Friend, they are not that familiar with Skype. I suspect it is a question of when, not if, but I am afraid that, at the moment at least, the answer is, “Not yet.”

I compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch on introducing the Bill, and I reassure him that we are working extremely hard and hope to bring forward a Bill that will do many of the things that he just made? Is he saying that internet voting is not part of the proposals the Government are currently preparing?

Sir Greg Knight: Will the Minister clarify the remarks he just made? Is he saying that internet voting is not part of the proposals the Government are currently preparing?

John Penrose: I will clarify that: it is not currently part of our proposals, because we do not yet think the technology is safe enough. We will keep the technology under continual review, and at some point there might be a democratic consensus that it has become safe enough, but that moment is not now.

To conclude, we welcome the intention behind the Bill and remain committed to the manifesto pledge. We will introduce our version of it, which I hope will be different in technicalities but congruent in direction with getting rid of the 15-year rule and therefore disfranchising all missing voters. In parallel, we will introduce new measures, on a cross-party basis if possible, to find those under-represented groups, whether they are overseas or domestic voters, and to drive up registration wherever we can. With that, I hope that my hon. Friend will be reassured and feel able to withdraw the Bill, while he waits for our Bill to arrive, which I hope will not be too much longer.

10.35 am

Mr Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister for his response, and I am delighted to hear that, even as we speak, parliamentary counsel are struggling with the detail of what I hope will be not just a Government Bill, but Government regulations to go with it, so that there is not a long gap between the Bill and the regulations. It is often much better if the draft regulations can be produced at the same time as the Bill. If that is the reason for the delay, I will be prepared to accept that, because it is much easier for the House to consider a Bill when it has the regulations—the detailed implementation scheme—before it. I can understand that it has not been possible to do that. I was disappointed with the expression “in due course”, but I can assure him that, if we have not made progress by the time of the next Queen’s Speech—whenever that might be—I shall seek to resurrect the Bill in the next Session and to keep the pressure on the Government.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) for his generous remarks, but I am not sure I agree with his views about extending clause 1 to local government elections. That would involve a complex interaction, because, at the moment, EU citizens resident here can participate in local elections—the trigger is their residence here. If we said that non-British people not resident could participate in local government elections, that would be a significant extension and might have serious implications. Before we knew it—although this will, I hope, be sorted out on 23 June—we might find the EU suggesting that its citizens should be able to participate in our general elections, which would be completely wrong.

With those remarks, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion and Bill, by leave, withdrawn.

OFF-SHORE WIND FARM SUBSIDIES (RESTRICTION) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 March.
EU Membership (Audit of Costs and Benefits) Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I call Mr Chope to move the Second Reading debate on behalf of Mr Bone.

10.38 am

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I apologise on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for his being unable to participate in this debate. He has been waiting for the opportunity for a long time, and it is only because of a series of supervening events that he cannot be here to move the Bill’s Second Reading himself. In those circumstances, he asked me, as a co-sponsor, to move it on his behalf, which it gives me great pleasure to do.

You may be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this Bill, or a Bill very similar to it, has had a long gestation. It was back in the 2007-08 Session that I brought forward a Bill, supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough and other colleagues. It was entitled the European Union (Audit of Benefits and Costs of UK Membership) Bill to “establish a Commission to carry out regular audits of the economic costs and benefits of the UK’s membership of the European Union; and for connected purposes.”

That Bill had almost a full day’s debate here on 20 June 2008.

As we start today’s debate it is worth recalling some of the comments I made when opening the previous debate. The Bill was narrower than this one, in that it dealt only with the economic costs and benefits of the UK’s membership of the European Union. I started by referring to the preface to an excellent work by Ian Milne, “A Cost Too Far?: An Analysis of the Net Economic Costs and Benefits for the UK of EU Membership”. In the foreword to that pamphlet, which was published in July 2004, the former distinguished and late Speaker Lord Weatherill stated that when he was the Conservative Government’s Deputy Chief Whip in 1972, he supported entry into the European Common Market “on the assurance of the Prime Minister, Mr Edward Heath that “joining the community does not entail a loss of national identity or an erosion of essential national sovereignty.”

Lord Weatherill went on to say that things had moved on a bit since then, and that what was important was that “Parliamentarians now have a sacred duty honestly to explain the pros and cons of our developing relationship with the European Union. Only then can the people make an informed choice.”

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on putting forward this magnificent Bill and I thank him for giving me the privilege of being one of his co-sponsors. In the debate of 2008 and in the research by Ian Milne, was any prediction made that in 2016 we would be faced with a £62 billion annual deficit of trade with the European Union?

Mr Chope: The short answer is no. I do not think it was ever envisaged that the European Union would be such a manifest failure as an economic entity and would be unable to maintain its share of world trade. We know that since 1972, the EU share of world trade has declined significantly. We know, too, that the EU has not been growing in economic terms in the way people thought would be possible—even to the extent that we now face a situation in which half the new jobs being created in Europe are being created in the United Kingdom, while the other half are being created in the 27 other countries of the EU. When we first joined, the share of trade that the EU had with the rest of the world was significantly higher than it is now, despite the fact that at that time it had many fewer member countries. As the EU has got larger in numbers, its influence over trade in the rest of the world has declined. I do not think that any of that was anticipated by Mr Milne in his pamphlet.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does not the Bill have a serious drawback if it is seeking to educate the public? Clause 6 seeks to set up a commission that will report within 12 months. If we are supporting this Bill, is not the inescapable conclusion that we are, in effect, arguing for the referendum to be put back two years?

Mr Chope: My right hon. Friend is a lawyer, so he knows that he is absolutely correct. The Bill was brought forward back in June and we did not know then what would happen. We did not know when we would get a referendum. Now we know that we are going to get a referendum so I will not ask the House to give the Bill a Second Reading today. It has been overtaken by the welcome fact that we are getting our referendum on 23 June. I hope that when that happens, we will be able to have an objective assessment of the costs and benefits of our membership, although I must say that on the basis of recent events, I am rather concerned about whether there will be such an open and objective assessment by the Government. Still, I live in hope.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Is my hon. Friend proposing to withdraw the Bill or is he going to carry on with it?

Mr Chope: The answer to my hon. Friend is, as always, that I am going to wait and see what the Minister says in response to my Bill. I am not going to anticipate that. Discussing the Bill provides us with a chance to look at the various issues surrounding information, or lack of it, on the costs and benefits of our membership of the European Union.

Today, I am delighted that Lord Howard—Michael Howard, as he was when he was a Member of this House—has decided to join the leave campaign. I had the privilege of serving with him as a junior Minister for several years in the late 1980s so I know what a great supporter he is of the idea of Europe. What he has shown today by his decision, however, is that he is very much against us continuing to be members of a European Union that is increasingly out of touch with the needs of the people of Europe. That is a really important move, following so soon after the decision by Lord Owen to join the leave campaign.

As a further response to the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), let me say that I tabled a parliamentary question to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 1 June 2015. It said:
Mr Chope: To ask Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, if he will commission an independent audit of the economic costs and benefits of UK membership of the EU.

Do you know what answer I got, Madam Deputy Speaker? I shall read it to the House. It said:

"The Government has a clear mandate to improve Britain’s relationship with the rest of the EU, and to reform the EU"—I emphasise that point—"so that it creates jobs and increases living standards for all its citizens. The Government will hold an in/out referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU by the end of 2017."

What was the answer to the question—I hear you saying, Madam Deputy Speaker—about the economic costs and benefits of UK membership? There was no answer. Why was there no answer from the Treasury Minister? Why did the Treasury not want to answer the question? It knew that if it said “no”, it would be ridiculed; and it knew that it did not want such an audit, so it was not prepared to say yes.

Mr Hollobone: Is it not the case that Her Majesty’s Government have always been frightened of an independent objective analysis of the costs and benefits of our membership, which explains why they were so worried about the answer to my hon. Friend’s question? Only today, we have heard the latest spin from Her Majesty’s Government that, were we to leave the European Union, the pound would fall and holidays would be more expensive for those going to Europe. I always thought it was the convention of Her Majesty’s Government, and in particular the Chancellor of the Exchequer, not to comment on the future direction of exchange rates, but does this not demonstrate that we are now in an era of spin because they are frightened of independent objective assessment?

Mr Chope: As ever, my hon. Friend has made an important and, indeed, fundamental point. I would just add that it is even odder that the Government should comment on sensitive issues relating to exchange rates at the same time—on the very same day—as saying that they were not prepared to answer questions about the disparity between the number of people from the European Union who registered for national insurance numbers last year and the number of people who are alleged to have come here from the European Union to work. I believe that more than 600,000 asked for national insurance numbers, but the Government say that only about 250,000 came here in that year. When the Government were asked to explain the difference between the two figures, their answer—it is in the papers today, so it must be correct—was that it would be wrong to answer the question, because it might influence the forthcoming referendum. I am sure that the Chancellor, the Prime Minister or whoever it was who said that we would all have to pay more for our holidays did not do so in order to try to influence the outcome of the referendum.

Mr Hollobone: I disagree with my hon. Friend. They said that deliberately to try to mislead people into thinking that their holidays would become more expensive. The truth is that exchange rates go up and down, and are very difficult to predict. However, if the Government are going to start commenting on the future direction of exchange rates, should not they at least do so in a balanced way, and point out that were the pound to decrease in value, that would be extremely good news for hard-pressed British exporters who are seeking to sell more of our products abroad?

Mr Chope: Absolutely. That is another side of this very important argument.

I referred extempore to what the Government were reported to have said yesterday about the disparity between the figures, but let me now give the exact figures. A total of 630,000 EU citizens registered for national insurance numbers entitling them to work or claim benefits in Britain last year, yet it is said that there were only 257,000 new EU migrants. Incidentally, 209,000 of those national insurance number registrations came from residents, or citizens, of Romania and Bulgaria.

Jonathan Portes, of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, sought an explanation for this extraordinary disparity, but was told that the Government were not prepared to give more details because “it might prejudice the outcome of the EU referendum.”

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am sure that it would.

Mr Chope: Well, it depends what the answer was, does it not?

This illustrates the problem that we have with the unequal use of resources and statistics. Having refused to answer the simplest of questions from me last June, the Treasury is now refusing to inquire further into what is, on the face of it, an extraordinary disparity, while at the same time making the scaremongering assertions to which my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) has referred.

The purpose of my Bill is to introduce some objectivity and independence into the whole process of evaluating the costs and benefits of our membership of the European Union. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie), the Chairman of the Treasury Committee, has launched an inquiry into the economic costs and benefits. He is doing a lot of good work, and I look forward to the publication of the report, but, having read much of the oral evidence, I note that the answer given by a great many experts, whether pro or anti-EU, is that it is extremely hard to be sure one way or the other.

During the forthcoming referendum campaign, we might be well advised to note the information that is set out so ably in House of Commons Library briefing paper 06091, which was published in January this year. According to chapter 6,

“‘There is no definitive study of the economic impact of the UK’s EU membership or the costs and benefits of withdrawal. Framing the aggregate impact in terms of a single number, or even irrefutably demonstrating that the net effects are positive or negative, is a formidable difficult exercise.’ Why is that?

“This is because many of the costs and benefits are subjective or intangible. It is also because a host of assumptions must be made to reach an estimate. If the UK were to leave the EU, assumptions must be made about the terms on which this would be done and how Government would fill the policy vacuum left in areas where the EU currently has competence. If the UK were to remain in the EU, assumptions would need to be made about how policy in the EU would develop.”

“...
That is a very important point. We often hear—and we heard from the Prime Minister this week—words to the effect that there will be no leap in the dark if we decide to stay in the European Union; it will all be as plain as a pikestaff. However, the House of Commons Library briefing clearly states that we do not know how policy in the EU would develop if we chose to remain:

“Estimates of the costs and benefits of EU membership are likely to be highly sensitive to such assumptions.”

If the Government, whose current robust line is that we must at all costs stay in the European Union, start presenting figures and data, how shall we be able to assure ourselves that those figures and data are objective? I think the answer is that we shall not be able to do that, because the figures and data will come from a biased source.

Mr Hollobone: It seems to me that, rather than trying to present independent and objective statistics and data to the British public, Her Majesty’s Government are putting increasing emphasis on spin. For example, the claim that 3 million British jobs depend on our membership of the European Union is trotted out by all those who are campaigning for us to remain in the European Union, although any objective, independent assessment demonstrates that it is a complete myth.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is only one of the figures that have been strongly criticised in evidence to the Treasury Committee. It has now been ridiculed, but can we be sure that it will not be replicated in the Government propaganda leading up to the referendum?

The House of Commons Library briefing states:

“Open Europe (2015) The Consequences, challenges & opportunities facing Britain outside the EU estimated the effect on UK GDP in 2030”—

some 15 years from now—

“of leaving the EU could potentially be in the range from -2.2% to +1.55% of GDP. However, the study argued that a more realistic range was between -0.8% and +0.6% of GDP.”

In other words, there is no significant difference either way. Yet between now and 23 June, I predict the Government will be suggesting that it is all one way and it will be an economic disaster if we have the courage and conviction to take responsibility for our own lives and our own destiny and leave the EU.

The other part of the Library paper I want to mention is a reference to a May 2014 report by Civitas on trade advantages of the EU. It found that the trade benefits of EU membership were exaggerated. Based on a study of UK exports since 1960, Civitas found that UK trade with European nations outside the EU had increased dramatically, while the UK’s trade with other EU members accounted for no more of its trade with leading economies than in 1973. That goes back to a point we were making earlier.

Mr Hollobone: Yes, we were making that point earlier, and when we joined the EU—the Common Market as it then was in 1972—we did not have a £62 billion annual trade deficit with our EU partners. Over the 44 years of our membership, the trade deficit has grown. To put this in simple terms, the EU nations are selling to us £62 billion-worth every year more than we are selling to them. So our trade with our EU partners has deteriorated over the past 44 years, not improved.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and the figures he quotes are almost identical to those in this House of Commons Library briefing paper, which quotes figures from the Office for National Statistics balance of payments statistical bulletin. They show exactly the effect my hon. Friend describes. I wonder how much of that information we will see in the Government’s leaflets in the forthcoming campaign.

Mr Hollobone: Can my hon. Friend also confirm that, as a result of our EU membership, we have lost Britain’s seat at the World Trade Organisation? That means that we have lost our sovereign ability to negotiate friendly free trade arrangements with other countries around the world. So, for example, a country as small as Iceland has negotiated a friendly free trade treaty with an economic superpower like China, yet we are forbidden to do exactly the same thing because of our membership of the EU.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend again makes a telling point. I was going to come to it later, but as he has raised it now, let us put on the record, for example, the concern many of our constituents have about TTIP, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership being negotiated between the EU and the United States. A legal opinion has been circulated to a number of us over the last 24 hours saying if TTIP goes ahead as proposed, it would potentially be disastrous for our national health service. I do not know whether that is correct or not, but there is an opinion saying that that could be the impact. Why are we relying on the EU to negotiate a trade deal with the US? Why do not we, as the fifth largest economy in the world—English-speaking, committed to free trade—make our own trade deal with the US? The short answer is that we are not allowed to do so until we leave the EU.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I wholeheartedly agree with what my hon. Friend is saying. On TTIP, does he agree that the following is an interesting factor in any cost-benefit analysis? We are always told that if we want a free trade agreement with the EU, we will have to accept free movement of people. Does he think America will accept the free movement of people—of all EU citizens—into the United States when it signs its free trade agreement with the EU?

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend makes a good point—

Sir Edward Leigh: Or Canada, which has an agreement.

Mr Chope: As my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) suggests, North America has its own North American Free Trade Agreement, which brings Canada, Mexico and the United States together. However, as Donald Trump and many others would bear witness, under that there is no free movement of people between Mexico and the US or between Canada and US, but there is still a free trade agreement.

Sir Edward Leigh: More than that, Canada has an agreement with the EU on trade and there is no free movement of EU nationals into Canada.

Mr Chope: Absolutely, and I look forward to hearing what my hon. Friend has to say if he is able to catch your eye later on, Madam Deputy Speaker.
Mr Hollobone: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point about TTIP. He will have received letters and emails from constituents, as have I, expressing very real concern that the 28 additional words we need in the agreement to protect our NHS are not in the draft TTIP terms. Just to make it crystal clear, were we to leave the EU, we could negotiate such an agreement with the US and include in the agreement, under our new sovereign capabilities, those crucial 28 words that all the TTIP campaigners would like to see.

Mr Chope: Exactly, and if we did not include them we could be held to account by our constituents in this House for having let them down. At the moment we can just say, “Well, it’s beyond our control; we haven’t got any influence over this.”

Oliver Colvile: Will my hon. Friend just explain then how long he thinks that might take given the time it has taken to get to the position we are in at the moment?

Mr Chope: That is interesting. I was at a meeting the week before last with a group of people from the US Senate and Congress who were interested in the subject of TTIP. I was invited to take the chair of this gathering, and one of the first questions I asked was how many of these people thought TTIP was going to be resolved by the end of this year. The answer was zero.

What we were told when the Prime Minister launched this initiative in 2013 was that we would get this sorted out before the end of the Obama presidency; it is absolutely clear we are not going to get it sorted out before then. So I then asked the same gathering of people how many of them thought it would be sorted out by the end of next year. Again, nobody thought that. Basically, the message coming from these people who are very well connected on Capitol Hill was that TTIP is very much in the long grass as far as the US is concerned because of the difficulties being put in the negotiations by the European Union, which is trying to maintain the protectionism that is still espoused by so many members of the EU and that is not compatible with what the US wants. So in answer to my hon. Friend’s question about how long a resolution would take, my view is that we would get a bilateral trade agreement between the UK and the US one heck of a sight quicker than we are ever going to get a trade deal between the EU and the US.

Mr Hollobone: To extend that principle into a future where Britain is outside the EU, given that we are already 100% compliant with all the EU obligations, should it not be possible to negotiate a free trade agreement between Britain and the EU in double-quick time after our EU exit?

Mr Chope: Absolutely. The fall-back position if we did not negotiate such a deal would be that we would have a continuing relationship on WTO rules, which are signed up to by the EU. So any suggestion that there would be a complete curtailment of trade between us and the EU when we leave is absurd. Why would the EU not want to sign up very quickly with the UK? They are selling us more than we are selling them, so it must be in their interests to try to maintain those connections.

Tellingly, and disappointingly, in addressing this point in Monday’s statement the Prime Minister did not talk in absolute terms. Instead of facing up to the fact that we sell less to the European Union than it sells to us, he started talking in percentage terms. That is completely misleading because we are but one of 28 countries in the EU, so if we start talking about the percentage of EU exports that come to us compared with the percentage of our exports that go to the EU, we will present a distorted picture. It was very sad that the Prime Minister chose not to use the absolute figures and instead resorted to such misleading percentages.

Philip Davies: We are also told that if we had a free trade agreement with the EU, we would still have to have all our laws decided by the European Union. When my hon. Friend had his discussions with his American friends, did he become aware of whether the Americans were going to accept their law being changed for them by the European Union, by qualified majority voting, when they entered into their free trade agreement with it?

Mr Chope: We did not get down to that sort of detail, because the feeling was that we are a long way apart on this. There is also a feeling that there is a lot more commonality between the British people and the people of the United States; we share a common language, the common law and a common heritage, and that is very different from the approach of so many other EU countries. On the basis that we have this special relationship with the US, we would be able to prosper and develop our trade together through bilateral open trading arrangements far more effectively than is being done at the moment with the EU. That is an important factor to take into account when assessing the costs and benefits of membership.

I am conscious of the fact that a number of other people wish to participate in this debate, so I will not say much more now. I merely wish to point out that the Bill proposes terms of reference, whereby the independent commission that would be set up to examine the current costs and benefits would be “taking into account the impact of membership on the UK’s—

(a) economy (including consideration of public expenditure and receipts resulting directly from membership”).

Of course, we know that in round figures we are paying in about £10 billion more than we get back every year. Interestingly, in yesterday’s statement on the EU solidarity fund and flooding the Minister made much of the fact that we would be applying to get some money back from the fund, but he did not think this would amount to anything more, at best, than about the equivalent of one day’s net contributions to the EU. He admitted that even getting back one day’s net contribution would involve an enormous amount of bureaucracy on both sides, which typifies the costs at the moment and how unfair it is that our people should be paying £10 billion net a year to the EU.

Sir Greg Knight: My hon. Friend made a prediction earlier. Will he comment on my prediction that if this country is misguided enough to vote to remain in the EU, within a few months our contribution to the EU will go up, because it is totally incapable of keeping within existing programmes and budgets?

Mr Chope: I agree absolutely with my right hon. Friend, who brings an enormous amount of experience, not only as a former trade Minister, but as a former...
Deputy Chief Whip. I am delighted that he is playing a key part in the leave campaign. What is happening in Europe to deal with the migration crisis is breath-taking in its incompetence. We are talking about a major cost; this crisis will potentially cost the EU a fortune. Who will have to contribute to those costs if we remain in the EU? It is none other than the British taxpayer. I think my right hon. Friend’s prediction is right, but I hope we will never see whether it comes to pass because by then we will have left the EU.

Mr Hollobone: Ten billion pounds sounds like an enormous figure, and it is, but people often struggle to deal with figures when they get so big, so let me place it into a local context. In Kettering, we are struggling to get £30 million for an improvement to Kettering general hospital and the development of an urgent care hub on the site there. That sum is less than one day’s subscription to the EU but we are having a really difficult job getting even that small a sum out of the Treasury. Imagine what we could do with £10 billion to spend on important public services across our country, providing hospitals, schools, doctors, police officers and nurses.

Mr Chope: Exactly. My hon. Friend makes the point brilliantly. One thing the Treasury is apparently willing to help on is the cost of vellum; I believe it is offering to pay £30,000 a year. That is the way the Treasury works.

Sir Edward Leigh: Worth every penny.

Mr Chope: I am not commenting on that, but we will have plenty of £30,000 sums to spend when we leave.

Clause 5(b) talks about taking into account our “competitiveness and ability to trade freely (including consideration of the UK’s restricted ability to negotiate trade agreements and to engage in free trade with other countries)”. I have already covered that. Subsection (c) then deals with the issue of “national security and defence (including the UK’s ability to decide which non-nationals should be allowed to reside in the UK)”. That is a very big subject and I suspect some of my colleagues will wish to go into it in a bit more detail. At the moment, we do not have any control over non-nationals from the EU coming into our country. The figures published yesterday show a massive increase in net migration—it was again more than 300,000 in the year to September 2015.

We all supported the Prime Minister and the Conservative party manifesto on the promise in 2010, in a pledge repeated during the last election campaign, that we would bring net migration in the UK down to the tens of thousands. I looked today in the press to see what the Prime Minister’s response was to the latest net migration figures, which show that more than 300,000 people came in that year period, 257,000 of whom came from the EU. If we were going to get the figure down to the tens of thousands and even if we prevented anybody from coming to this country from anywhere other than the EU, we would still have to reduce the number of people coming from the EU by about two-thirds—from 257,000 to just less than 100,000. With the most heroic assumptions, how is it possible to say that the very modest measures contained in the package that came back from the negotiations in Brussels could ever deliver a reduction of 157,000 EU migrants a year?

Mr Hollobone: Is this not the crucial point for people who voted Conservative at the last election on the basis of that manifesto pledge to cut immigration to tens of thousands? The truth is that that objective will simply be unattainable while we remain a member of the EU, so the only way to solve this is to vote to leave on 23 June.

Mr Chope: Exactly. If we ask whether the Government have any idea how we could achieve that without leaving, I am sure we will be told that we cannot have any more information because it might prejudice the outcome of the referendum.

It is not just the numbers; there is also an associated cost. I refer to the document called “The best of both worlds”. There is a problem with the title of that document. I believe in one world, and the people who are defending our position in the European Union seem to be under the illusion that there is more than one world. There is just one world, and we can be the masters of our own destiny in that world if we are released from being in the European Union.

Mr Hollobone: Maybe some members of the Government are living on a different planet.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend makes the point in his own inimitable way. Perhaps that should be the subject of a parliamentary question in due course.

The document entitled “The best of both worlds” refers in paragraph 2.103 to the costs of the migration coming in. It has been pretty difficult to get hold of this information, but it has at last been wrung out of the Government. The document states: “On average, families with a recent EEA migrant claim almost £6,000 per year in tax credits”.

If a million EU migrants have come in during the past four or five years, as we know from the latest figures, and over 40% of those are claiming tax credits, the cost of that is 400,000 multiplied by £6,000 per year. That is a lot of money, and that is just the cost of in-work benefits to non-UK citizens from the European Union. That creates pressure on our public services, such as health and schools. I saw in the Evening Standard last night how many people will not be able to get their children into the school of their choice in London in the coming year because of the increased population.

All the issues have a bearing on the question whether it is in our best interests to leave the European Union. Having done research such as I have, I am in no doubt that it would be in the best interests of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. The purpose of this Bill is to ensure that the Government put forward objective figures in relation to the issue, rather than figures that are based on prejudice.

11.22 am

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) who, as ever, has put his case persuasively. I did not need much persuasion, as it happens, but if I had, he would certainly have persuaded me of the case that he made.

I shall focus on a few aspects of the Bill. One part that needs stressing is the independence that the Bill asks for any cost-benefit analysis. My fear is that over
the next few months we will hear the Government say—we may even hear it from the Minister today—that they will do a cost-benefit analysis of our membership of the European Union, and, as we have been calling for that, we should be placated by that assurance. But we are not asking just for the Government’s cost-benefit analysis of our membership of the European Union. We already know the Government’s view of that, and I have no confidence at all in the Government producing an objective cost-benefit analysis. They will resort to all kinds of dodgy figures, spin, presumptions and so on, and we will no doubt end up being told that the benefits of being in the EU are enormous and the costs are negligible, and vice versa were we to leave.

I have no doubt that that is what the Government would do. We have only just started the referendum campaign and already some rather strange arguments have started to develop. I will come on to some of those shortly. The key part of the Bill, which I hope the Minister will take away with him for when the Government pull their cost-benefit analysis out of the hat, relates to the appointment of the commission that carries out the analysis. The Bill calls for a balance between those members of the commission in favour of remaining and those in favour of leaving the EU, with an equal number on either side. The chairman should be broadly neutral, and no member should be or have been a Member of the European Parliament or an employee of the European Commission, whose pension would therefore be dependent on our membership of the European Union.

Those are not unreasonable proposals. Most people would say that that is a reasonable basis for carrying out a cost-benefit analysis. If the Minister thinks that saying that the Government intend to conduct a cost-benefit analysis will satisfy us, it will not. We want some guarantee of the independence of the people involved, and only at that point will I be satisfied.

I was intrigued by what my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch said about the questions that he has posed to Treasury Ministers, and not getting an answer to the question, but a different answer altogether. Funnily enough, I asked the Chancellor a question in the Chamber on his answer, it appears that he had had no such opportunity in the referendum. I would say that this is precisely the judgment that the British people and this Parliament have to make: what are the economic benefits of our European Union membership, such as the single market, and what would be the alternative? That will be part of the lively debate, and as I say, the Treasury will be fully involved in that debate.”

As far as I could see—people can make their own interpretation of the Chancellor’s reply—he could not give one single example of what we got back for our £19 billion membership fee. He knows, presumably, as he is a canny kind of fellow, that he could not say that we get free trade for our £19 billion a year, because he presumably knows, just as the rest of us know, for the reasons set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, that given that we have a £62 billion trade deficit with the EU, we would be able to trade freely with the EU if we were to leave.

David Morris: Hypothetically, if we did come out of the EU, what would happen to the £62 billion trade deficit? Does my hon. Friend have any idea how we would be able to pay Europe back, or vice versa?

Philip Davies: I suspect that, in the short term, not a fat lot would happen to the £62 billion trade deficit with the EU, as we would pretty much carry on in the same way. We would keep trading with it, and it would keep trading with us. I tried to check that out. I asked the Prime Minister, after one of his European Council meetings, whether he had had any discussions with Angela Merkel that would indicate that, if we were to leave the EU, she would want her country to stop selling BMWs, Mercedes, Volkswagens and Audis free of tariff to the UK. The Prime Minister did not say anything at all about that, so I presumed that he had not heard anything. Given his determination that we should stay in the EU, I am sure that, if he had had any inkling at all that the Germans were not going to continue selling us their cars free of tariff, he would have been more than happy to put it on the public record. As people can see from his answer, it appears that he had had no such indication from the German Government that they would stop trading freely with us.

Sir Edward Leigh: The answer to my hon. Friend’s question is simple: if we left the EU, we would not have to pay a £10 billion a year subscription just to have a £70 billion a year deficit.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. At the end of the day, what this boils down to is people’s confidence in their negotiating abilities. I used to work for Asda, and I fear that, if some of my hon. Friends had been our buyers and had used their negotiating skills, we would have gone bust. In effect, what many of my colleagues are saying—and what Labour Members...
are saying—is that we have a £62 billion trade deficit, but we do not think that we can negotiate a free trade agreement without handing over a huge membership fee every single year. That is the easiest negotiation known to mankind. If they cannot negotiate that deal, what on earth can these people negotiate? If the Prime Minister were to claim that he could not negotiate a free trade deal with the EU based on that trade deficit every year—I am sure that he will not say that because he claims to be a good negotiator—he would not be fit to lead this country into those negotiations. That is what I would say to anybody who aspires to such a role.

Mr Hollobone: Is not my hon. Friend's point exactly right and enhanced by the fact that we already by definition meet 100% of the EU’s requirements for a free trade deal because we are part of the single market? Once we are outside the European Union, it should be relatively straightforward, given that we are the fifth largest economy in the world, to come up with terms.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The point he makes is self-evident, and I am sure that it will be self-evident to the British public.

When we look at the terms of reference of our cost-benefit analysis, the areas that the Bill asks the Government to consider are the economy, trade, national security, further regulation, and sovereignty.

David Morris: What I want to clarify is this: if we are the fifth largest economy in the world, how much is that down to trading with Europe, and how much does that contribute to us being the fifth largest economy in the world?

Philip Davies: It is not a question of “if”—we are the fifth largest economy in the world. That is a matter not of hypothesis or aspiration, but of fact. We are the fifth largest economy in the world, and therefore, clearly, we are in a very good position to negotiate trade deals. I am not sure that there is any country in the world that would not want to have a trade deal with the fifth largest economy in the world.

Interestingly, the people who are so anxious for us to stay in make what they think is the killer point that 44% of our exports go to the European Union and that only a very tiny proportion goes to the emerging economies of the BRIC—Brazil, Russia, India and China—nations. We should not boast about that; we should be deeply concerned. The fact is that we have got ourselves shackled to a declining part of the world’s economy. That is the problem for the remain campaigners. According to figures from the House of Commons Library, when we joined the European Union, the countries that make up the EU now account for a third of the world economy. By 2020, that will be 20%, by 2030 17% and by 2050 13%. We should bear in mind, too, that we are 4% of the world economy. If we were to leave the European Union we would take off the 4% that we represent, which would mean that the EU would be 9% of the world's economy. Some people think that it is great that so much of our trade is dependent on being shackled to such a group, but I think that is something that we should be deeply concerned about. It is a matter of great shame that we have such a low proportion of trade with the growing parts of the world economy, which is why it is so important that we leave the European Union. We need to leave this declining market and start building up our trade with all the growing parts of the world economy. That is what we should be doing.

Mr Hollobone: The world’s largest economies in order are: China, America, Japan, Germany and Britain. Were we to leave the European Union, there is every chance that we could overtake Germany and move into fourth place. We could negotiate on our own terms, with our seat back at the World Trade Organisation, friendly free trade agreements with growing economies such as China and India, and all those old Commonwealth countries that we effectively abandoned in 1972.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. We are always told that the EU is the biggest single market in the world. What is not said is that it would not be if we were to leave. It is only the biggest single market in the world largely because we are a member of it. If we were to leave it, it certainly would not be. Nobody ever mentions that particular point.

Interestingly, a briefing from the House of Commons Library said that if we were to leave the European Union, the UK would be the EU’s single biggest export market—bigger than China, America and anywhere else in the world. Why on earth would the EU not want to do a free trade deal with its single biggest export market? Of course it would. Anybody who tries to suggest otherwise is either completely crackers or is deliberately misleading people. It is palpably clear that that would not be the case.

The case in terms of the economy and trade is very clear. Competitiveness is one of the key points. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch touched on that when he said that staying in the EU was a leap into the dark. Of course, it is just that. We pool our sovereignty in many areas because we sign lots of treaties, but when we sign treaties with other countries, that treaty agreement tends to stay the same: the nature of it does not change in any shape or form unless we agree to it. That is how treaties tend to work. But our membership of the European Union is based on a treaty that does not work like that. What happens is that, every so often, the European Commission, which is completely unelected and unaccountable to anybody, proposes new legislation. We think that it is completely ridiculous. In any other normal kind of treaty relationship, we would not be susceptible to it unless we agreed to it. With the EU, we are being asked to sign up to changes on a monthly basis based on qualified majority voting where we get outvoted in the Council of Ministers. If we want to remain in the EU, we are not signing up to the status quo; the European Union does not do the status quo. The EU is always trying to introduce new regulations, new burdens on business, and new protectionist measures to protect its failing businesses, to protect French farmers, and all the rest of it. Effectively, we are signing up to something about which we know little. We have no idea where it ends and what measures will be introduced as a result of it.

David Morris: As far as I am aware—I have been out to Brussels and done battle with the bureaucrats there—the problems are to do with not what Europe gives to us,
but how ineffectively it is scrutinised when it comes here. A lot of the problems that we have are lost in translation. For example, there was a proposition to stop women wearing high heels in hairdressing salons, and that legislative measure spread to town halls, and perhaps even to shiny floors here in Parliament. When we drilled down into the detail, however, it was a mis-translation that eventually got the whole thing thrown out. Does my hon. Friend agree that more scrutiny should be given to European issues in Parliament and in Committees, and that more Committees should be set up should we vote to stay in the EU at the referendum?

**Philip Davies:** There is not much point in spending hours and hours scrutinising legislation that we have no ability to amend or change in any way. It does not matter how much time we spend scrutinising it; we are still susceptible to it, so I cannot see that there is a great deal of point in doing that. If my hon. Friend is right and a lot of the problems in this country are created by bad translations of European legislation, that is another good reason why we should leave the European Union, so that all our laws can be decided in this place and written in English so that we understand them. I am pleased that he has given us yet another reason—one I had not thought of—for leaving the European Union. His intervention is welcome.

**Mr Hollobone:** An extension of that argument is the imposition of VAT on key products in this country, and a lot of fuss has been made about the fact that we cannot cancel the 5% VAT on domestic fuel, which has a big impact on low-income households. Recently, a very big fuss was made about VAT on women’s sanitary products. The British Parliament and Government are unable to remove VAT on those items without the consent of the European Union. If people want such situations to change, surely the message is clear: vote to leave on 23 June.

**Philip Davies:** My hon. Friend is right, and we have a ridiculous situation. We are supposed to be a proud nation, and in that debate on sanitary products, everybody in the House agreed that it was inappropriate for VAT be levied on them. If we were a properly sovereign nation outside the EU, that could be mended in a flash in the forthcoming Budget. In mid-March, the Chancellor could announce that VAT on sanitary products will be ended, and that would be the end of the situation. Instead we are left as a proud nation that resorts to a Treasury Minister saying, “I will commit to go and ask the Exchequer and said that given the extenuating circumstances, it would be a decent gesture for him to waive VAT on the repairs caused by that flooding. What was the answer? That the Chancellor’s hands are tied and he does not have the ability to waive VAT because that matter is decided by the European Union. Therefore, 20% will be added to the bill of my rowing club for the repairs from the flooding, and we cannot make decisions on VAT ourselves because they are decided for us by the European Union. It is funny how we never hear that from the remain campaigners. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) will defend that situation.

**David Morris:** I will defend that because VAT is the sole domain of HMRC and not the Chancellor of the Exchequer—I know because I had a similar problem in my constituency. Perhaps my hon. Friend will consider the point about sanitary products. I agree that we should not be paying VAT on them, but because of our special relationship in Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)—sadly, he is not in his place today—found a way around that VAT going to Europe, so that it now goes to charities. Does he agree that that was a good move?

**Philip Davies:** That had nothing to do with a special status, and neither does it benefit the consumer who still has to pay VAT on the sanitary products that they buy. Where the money ends up is of no benefit to the consumer whatsoever; it just means that it does not benefit the Treasury directly.

**Mr Hollobone:** As I understand it, VAT is still paid on the sanitary products and it still goes to Brussels, but the Chancellor is paying the equivalent sum of money to charities. We are effectively paying twice as much as we would if we had sovereignty.

We are signing up to a treaty, and the EU is saying to us, “You sign the treaty, and if we want to change things against your wishes, we have the freedom to do so through qualified majority voting.” If I said to you, “I have signed a deal on something, but by the way, I can change the terms at any time, and there is nothing you can do to stop me”, I do not think you would sign up to it—nobody would sign up to such a deal, but that is in effect what we are being asked to sign up to in the EU referendum if we vote to remain.

**Mr Chope:** My hon. Friend has not mentioned the part of the deal that states that we will now lose the little influence that we had in the past in relation to the deeper integration of the eurozone. For example, we will not be able to argue that Greece would be better off outside the eurozone, or have any influence on the consequences of a sclerotic eurozone being uncompetitive, and the result that that leads to of more people from the eurozone wanting to work in our country.

**Philip Davies:** My hon. Friend is right. I have already covered economic and trade matters and regulations, and I know that other people want to speak so I shall not go on for too long. National security and immigration are crucial issues that are mentioned in clause 5 of the Bill. National security is a key area, and the remain campaign seems to think that it is one of its trump
I invite anybody to look back over a few years at the figures for each nationality, because they will see a huge increase in the number of EU nationals in our prisons. That is because these people are coming to the UK under the free movement of people to commit crimes. As a result, we are creating lots of unnecessary victims of crime in the UK. People who want to remain in the EU should be honest about the fact that that is one of the downsides. They should not pretend that there is some miracle passport control system that stops these people coming into the UK, which, as I say, is a blatant lie.

**David Morris:** I wish there were a passport control system that could vet these people coming into the country, but does my hon. Friend not agree that the Prime Minister, in his renegotiations, has secured easier ways to deport these criminals and, may I add, to stop them coming into the country?

**Philip Davies:** No, I do not accept that at all. The Prime Minister has done absolutely nothing to stop these people coming into the UK—literally nothing. There is nothing in place to stop them; there are a few people on a watch list whom we can stop coming into the UK, but they would be on a watch list whether we were in the EU or outside it. We need to develop a watch list for people from around the world, because this is not an EU issue. We can already stop those people coming to the UK, and we would always be able to stop them coming to the UK, if they are on a terrorist watch list. I am talking about the thousands and thousands of criminals who are unknown to the British authorities, who come through every week on an EU passport to commit their crimes. When I was out with West Yorkshire police a few years ago—this might seem fanciful, and it seemed fanciful to me when I first heard it—they told me they had a problem with people getting a short-haul flight from other EU countries to Leeds Bradford airport, going out into Leeds city centre and committing high-value crimes and robberies, and then being back on the plane out to their country of origin before the police have even finished investigating the crime. I had not even thought that that type of thing could happen, but West Yorkshire police told me that that was a serious concern for them.

Of course, it is easy for people do these things while we are in the EU—there is nothing to prevent them from coming here. They are known to their own national law enforcement agencies, so they are at risk of being apprehended in their own countries. It is much easier for them to commit crimes in the UK, where they are not known to anybody—they can come in and go out in a flash. We have to be aware that these are problems.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** To be absolutely fair—we should be fair, and that is why we need an independent audit—our own crooks can presumably do the same in those other countries?

**Philip Davies:** Yes, indeed. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The problem is that there are much richer pickings in the UK than in some of the countries these people come from.

The other aspect of this is that, even if these people run the risk of being caught, they would, I suspect, much prefer to spend their time in a British prison than
in a prison in their home nation. So this is a win-win, given their chances of being caught and what happens when they are caught. I am afraid that that does not quite work the same in reverse.

Mr Chope: When I visited Denmark with a Select Committee in the last Parliament, we heard directly from the Danish about the problem they have with eastern Europeans coming into Denmark and committing crimes. If those people are convicted of those crimes, they will earn more in prison than they would have been able to earn in their home country, so there is no deterrent.

Mr Chope: May I give my hon. Friend an example of where our security is much worse as a result of being in the European Union? People from outside who come into the European Union at the moment often do not give their fingerprints, as they should. I suggested that we take DNA samples from people coming from outside, but I was told that that is unlawful under the Eurodac regulations, so we cannot take that precaution.

Philip Davies: That is another interesting point I had not factored in. I will bow to my hon. Friend’s superior knowledge. I have visited prisons in Denmark, and that is not something I was aware of, so I am grateful to him for putting that point on the record.

Suggesting that our national security is enhanced by being in the EU, when we let thousands of EU criminals in every year, is fanciful in the extreme. Being susceptible to crime from such individuals is doing nothing at all for the security of my constituents.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. I very much agree that people wanting to come and live in the EU should have to give their fingerprints and DNA, so that if they do commit a crime, it is easy to track them down, convict them and deport them. As he says, however, that is not what happens. The best the Government have come up with so far is that if somebody comes into the UK and commits a crime, the police can go through some burdensome procedure of asking other EU countries whether they have a fingerprint match for a crime that has been committed there. If those countries ever manage to get back to us, which they probably do not half the time, Lord knows what may happen on the back of that. However, that is not the same as stopping people who are criminals coming into the UK.

David Morris: I am listening intently to my hon. Friend’s eloquent arguments about letting people into the country. Will he clarify whether these are people coming into the EU from nations outside the EU? As I understand it, the security systems between the EU bloc and Great Britain are seamless and can interface with, say, the databases of the French and the German authorities, but where people are coming into the EU, we have to get the co-operation of the country they are coming from. If we came out of the EU, would we have to do the same procedure in reverse?

Philip Davies: I am not entirely sure what my hon. Friend is driving at. At the moment, if somebody comes to the UK from outside the EU, we do not have to let them in, whereas if they are an EU citizen, we pretty much do have to let them in. It does not matter how suspicious we are of their motives—that is irrelevant. I want the more robust immigration policy that we are allowed for non-EU nationals to apply to EU nationals too. Nobody is saying that we do not want anybody to come into the UK from the EU, but I would rather we had some choice as to who we allow in. It is a great privilege to come into the UK. We should make sure that it is indeed a great privilege and that we are not just letting any old person into the country, which is the situation at the moment.

On sovereignty, it cannot be right that people making so many of our laws are unelected and completely unaccountable to anybody. The remain campaigners say, “Well, of course we have a European Parliament to scrutinise all these laws.” First, Members of the European Parliament who represent the UK are a tiny proportion of the total, so even if every single UK MEP voted against something, there is no guarantee that it would make any difference whatsoever. Secondly, if, in this country, the Government were permanently in office and the only people elected were the MPs scrutinising the decisions they were making, that would be a bizarre situation and there would be uproar. Yet the justification for having the European Commission, unelected and unaccountable, initiating all the legislation, which is the role of Governments in most national Parliaments, is that MEPs are elected. It is unbelievable that anybody can justify that kind of democratic situation. When we sign treaties with other countries, that is the end of it—the position does not get changed every five minutes by qualified majority voting, with things being imposed on us against our wishes. That is not how treaties work, but it is how our relationship with the European Union works.

We are told that we have a lot of influence in the EU. That argument was completely demolished by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) in his contribution to the Prime Minister’s statement on Monday. He pointed out that a freedom of information request showed that over the past two decades there had been a definitive vote in the European Council 72 times and that we had been outvoted 72 times. So on Monday the idea that we are wielding this huge influence in the European Union was clearly demolished. It was shown to be a complete load of old codswallop. It is an illusion of influence. We do not have any influence; we are having discussions around a table and being outvoted at every single turn, as Ministers who attend these things know to their cost.

We are told that the US wants us to stay in the EU and that that is a reason why we should. I do not doubt that it is in the United States’ best interests that we stay in the European Union, because we add a bit of common sense to it and it does not want the French, who are very anti-American, having even more power. If it is so important for the Americans that we stay in the European Union, perhaps they will pay our £18 billion membership fee each year for us. I look forward to President Obama making that offer when he comes to campaign in the referendum. I am sure that amount would be a drop in the ocean for the United States.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Let me bring to my hon. Friend’s attention the fact that the person representing the United States Government
who has called for us to stay is John Kerry, a former senator, who in the 1980s showed himself to be no friend of the United Kingdom but a sympathiser with the IRA when he held up a treaty allowing for the deportation of IRA activists from the United States to the United Kingdom, saying that the justice system in Northern Ireland did not work effectively. He is no friend of Britain and has been in the past a terrorist sympathiser.

Philip Davies: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing that to the House’s attention. With friends like that in the United States, I suspect we do not need many enemies.

I am prepared to accept that it may be in the best interests of the United States that we stay in the European Union. I am not going to question that for one minute, and I am sure that if I was an American I would probably be arguing the same. However, we should be making decisions that are in the best interests of the United Kingdom, not of the United States, which is big enough and bad enough to look after its own interests.

I look forward to a truly independent cost-benefit analysis that takes into account the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch has made and some of the points that I have made. Any cost-benefit analysis that ignores those points that have been raised today is not worth the paper it is written on. I say to the Minister that, if anybody in the Government is working on some bogus cost-benefit analysis that they think is going to work in hoodwinking the British public, I hope he will insist that it takes into account the points we have raised today.

Crucially, the membership of any committee that puts together a cost-benefit analysis must correspond to that insisted upon by this Bill, which calls for a balance of people who are in favour of and people who are against the UK’s membership, a neutral chairman, and for none of them to be a current or past Member of the European Parliament or the European Commission. Only if those criteria are met will we have a truly independent and worthwhile cost-benefit analysis. However, given the Government’s reluctance over many years to publish such a cost-benefit analysis, I am afraid that any decision to rush one through now will be treated with a great deal of cynicism and scepticism, not just by me, but by many people across the House and, more importantly, by the British public.

12.5 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, who in the 1980s showed himself to be no friend of the United Kingdom but a sympathiser with the IRA when he held up a treaty allowing for the deportation of IRA activists from the United States to the United Kingdom, saying that the justice system in Northern Ireland did not work effectively. He is no friend of Britain and has been in the past a terrorist sympathiser.

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Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. That is why we created the Office for Budget Responsibility. The question that I put to the Foreign Secretary, which he did not answer and which I repeat to the Minister, is: if this is the most important decision that we are going to make, why can we not depute the OBR to produce an analysis?

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch has suggested a different format. Because this is a private Member’s Bill, it is, as we know, for all sorts of reasons unlikely to become law, but he has at least raised the question. It is now incumbent on the Minister to answer my hon. Friend. I am sorry, but I think that my hon. Friend’s creation is unwieldy, calling as it does for us to find an equal number of people who are in favour of leaving and of remaining. There may be perfectly justifiable arguments for that, but the Government already have independent bodies, such as the OBR and the National Audit Office, which could do the work. The NAO, which is well respected, would perhaps not be expert at dealing with issues of sovereignty, but it could certainly deal with other issues mentioned by my hon. Friend such as “burden of regulation”, “economy (including consideration of public expenditure and receipts)” and “competitiveness and ability”. The Government already have in their hand a body or bodies that would be capable of producing such an analysis.

It is deeply worrying that Ministers who have decided to campaign to leave the EU are denied any civil service briefing on the matter. They are immediately thrown into purdah this week, and yet Ministers who are campaigning to remain in the EU have the full benefit of the civil service, which can apparently for weeks churn out propaganda. I do not use that word in a derogatory sense; propaganda simply means putting one’s point of view forward. The situation seems to me to be fundamentally unfair. Surely, the British way of doing things, particularly in referendums, is that we are fair.

We had a vote on purdah in the autumn, and my hon. Friend and I got into a bit of trouble for voting in favour of it, but we thought it was important. We thought that once the referendum campaign started, the Government should not be able to use its machine—its civil service—to argue for a point of view, because that does not happen in a general election. Perhaps we will learn from the Minister today when that purdah will actually start. Obviously, the Government are not in purdah at the moment. Civil servants are fully briefing, and the whole machine is churning out papers all the time.

All this is important because the referendum is supposed to bring a degree of closure to this subject, is it not? To do so, it must be seen to be absolutely fair. It is very important that both sides of the arguments are properly aired. Speaking for myself, if the British people decide by 55% to 45%, or whatever the figures are, to remain in the EU—after all the arguments have been properly put, and the no and yes campaigns have spent broadly the same amount of money—I will just have to accept that point of view.

However, this is a very complex area and the whole nature of the Government’s case is that leaving is all too risky. I made this point yesterday, but it is an important one: we should bear in mind that the Government are not approaching the referendum campaign with the sense of a great visionary movement in favour of the EU. The Prime Minister is saying, “Look, I am as great a Euro sceptic as you are, but I’m sorry, it’s all too risky.” When he says it is all too risky, he presumably means the costs of leaving in terms of national security, which is mentioned in the Bill, and particularly the very detailed debate on our competitiveness, the decisions of European Council meetings and the rest of it.

I want to emphasise that I see no rational argument against the Government commissioning a genuinely independent cost-benefit analysis. As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), our membership of the EU means paying a subscription of £10 billion a year in order to have a £70 billion a year deficit with the EU. Normally, when someone pays a subscription to a club, they do so to have a benefit: they are prepared to pay the cost because they get something back. Frankly, given that there is a deficit of £70 billion—I agree that it exists now and will almost certainly remain if we leave the EU, because of the strength of German engineering products or French food and drinks products and all the other reasons—that is quite a big subscription to pay for it.

We want an independent study. To go back to yesterday’s debate, the Minister for Europe said in his summing up, “I’ve sat through this debate, and those who want to leave the EU have not given any sense of their vision.” That is quite true, and it is incumbent on us—it could be done as part of such a study—to give the people and the House some sense of where we want to take the nation if we leave the EU. I accept that argument—the Minister for Europe kindly added that he said that “with the exception of my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough”—and I tried to give an alternative vision yesterday.

Such alternative visions need to be tested. I just have a point of view—I believe it is reasonable, but other people may say it is a prejudice—but there is no point my standing up in the House of Commons and articulating my alternative vision if there is no independent analysis of it. That is surely what the British people want and demand. I am asking them on 23 June to take the risk of leaving, and they therefore have the right to come back to me to ask such questions.

If we left the EU, I believe it would be quite exciting—I represent a rural area—to reclaim control of the common agricultural policy. In that context, I recommend the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to the Oxford farming conference. He made a detailed analysis of what leaving the EU would mean for farming policy. He made the point that although food and agriculture is a huge and massively important industry—it employs more than 3.5 million people and accounts for £85 billion of GNP—agriculture policy is entirely determined by the EU. On that, this House has very little, or virtually no, independence from the EU. He was putting forward his view and arguing that alternative subsidy arrangements could be made. For instance, he argued that we should broadly spend on subsidies what we are spending now, but create a different subsidy system.
He argued that we could divert more agricultural subsidies away from lowland farming to hill farmers in difficult farming environments.

I have been trying to wrestle with an understanding of farming policy for the 30 years I have been in this place. It is immensely complex, but again we have had virtually no detailed debate or analysis to inform our farmers on how they should vote. This is desperately important to them. There are hundreds of farmers in my constituency and tens of thousands of farmers throughout the country who want an answer, because they, for better or for worse, depend on the subsidy system.

Oliver Colvile: Does my hon. Friend recognise that it is not only the farming industry but the fishing industry that needs to be taken into account?

Sir Edward Leigh: I will come to the fishing industry in a moment.

Farmers are genuinely worried. I suppose the Government have got quite an easy task. They can just say, “Don’t worry. You don’t like the present system. You’ve been complaining for years that it is regulatory and burdensome, and that for years you were paid by the EU to rip out hedges and now you’re paid to put them back. You have to spend all your time not out on the land but sitting in your office in your farmhouse dealing with farming subsidies. It’s regulatory, burdensome, late and difficult but,” I suppose the Government would argue, “at least you are supported.” There is an implication on the part of the Government that if we were to leave the EU, the subsidies would vanish.

The Vote Leave campaign is absolutely explicit about that. I am absolutely explicit about it and I give this pledge. One should be quite careful what one says on the Floor of the House of Commons, but if we leave the EU the level of subsidy to the farming community will remain exactly what it is now. That is a pledge. I cannot give a pledge on behalf of the Government, but I cannot believe that anybody would renege from that. We have no idea. We have no independent analysis. We have had no real attempt, apart from by a few right hon. and hon. Friends, at detailing how the subsidies would change.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) mentioned fishing, which is even more important. I referred to this subject yesterday. I think I was the only one to mention it. This was the great debate we had on Europe this week with the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary: we were limited to very short speeches and I had time to say perhaps one sentence about fishing. There was no detailed analysis yesterday of what leaving the EU would mean for our fishing industry, yet it is of absolutely massive and crucial importance.

People forget that in the final days of the negotiations conducted by Mr Heath, way back in 1971, he was worried that the talks were stumbling. In the final days, he handed control of our fishing industry to the European Commission with disastrous results for the port of Grimsby, which is close to my constituency, and for our entire fishing industry. I would argue that if we left the EU, it would be extraordinarily exciting to reclaim control of our fishing fleets and fishing industry, given that we are an island and that we sit surrounded by some of the most productive fishing grounds in the world. Again, there has been virtually no intelligent, thorough and informed debate of how we could manufacture or create an alternative fishing policy.

Oliver Colvile: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course. I give way to somebody with far greater expertise in this area than me.

Oliver Colvile: The Plymouth marine laboratories were set up—I think in 1870—and they analyse whether we are overfishing our seas. If my hon. Friend wants, he could come and talk to them, but most certainly he might want to give them a ring.

Sir Edward Leigh: I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency. Perhaps I could sail there in my boat from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, where it is moored. But obviously we are deeply serious about this, because the last 30 years have been a traumatic experience for our fishermen. It is a matter of immense importance. Again, we need an independent audit.

Mr Chopie: Bearing in mind what my hon. Friend said about Ministers, is there not an issue with the fact that the fishing Minister, who has all this expertise and is keen that we should leave the EU, will not have the support of his civil servants in doing what needs to be done to ensure a strong and independent UK fishing industry after we leave?

Sir Edward Leigh: Exactly. It is extraordinary, given that we have this great industry and are a proud island race, and that much of our past and present is tied up in our fishing fleets, that the fishing Minister has already been put in the corner, like a naughty boy with a dunce’s hat on his head, and told to keep silent. It is amazing. This is the most important decision we are going to make—yet silence.

In trying to answer the Minister for Europe, who asked, “Why don’t the leave people give an alternative vision?”, I have talked a bit about fishing and agriculture, but what about trade? I have quoted Winston Peters, a former Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary of New Zealand—no slouch—who has talked in public about leaving behind the “betrayal” of 1973. Yes, we did betray them. We betrayed our friends in New Zealand and Australia, who, in two world wars, had come to our aid. He says there is the exciting prospect of recreating free trade between Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. It is an exciting prospect. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley made a good point about the declining proportion of world trade taken by the sclerotic, over-regulated and overtaxed EU. There is another world out there—the world of the burgeoning growth of China and India.

I will go into more detail about the Government’s case in a moment, but I would be quite happy for them to say, “This is all just pie in the sky—a romantic
That was my introduction, Madam Deputy Speaker. I now want to go into more detail about the history of this independent audit and analysis. People now argue—there is some lazy thinking on this—that way back in 1957 when the treaty of Rome was being signed, we were casual in our decision not to join it. A sort of myth has been created, particularly by my personal friend, Michael Heseltine, now Lord Heseltine, and others that this was an enormous wasted opportunity. Actually, people in government at the time were attempting a reasonable audit and analysis of what joining the treaty of Rome would mean. This debate has therefore been going on for a long time.

One cause of worry in 1957 was article 3 of the European Community treaty, which would “eliminate...customs duties and quantitative restrictions on imports and exports” between member states, establish a common tariff and “common commercial policy” and “abolish obstacles to freedom of movement for persons, services and capital”.

When we were having these debates in 1957, the view taken by the then Conservative Government was that that was a risk too great and particularly, showing the importance of objective analysis, too great a risk to the Commonwealth.

My personal view is that that was a right conclusion. Unfortunately, during the 1950s and '60s, there was a lack of confidence in our future as an independent nation. We should bear it in mind that we were dealing with a generation scarred by the second world war—I accept all the arguments about that. The hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass), who is going to reply to this debate on behalf of the Labour party, spoke most movingly yesterday about the scars of two world wars, and I can understand how that was an influence on people at the time. As I said, there was a lack of confidence, not just about peace in Europe, but about our own nature and the resilience of our manufacturing and service industries. That led directly to Harold Macmillan’s failed bid to join the then European Economic Community.

As we know, of course, we eventually joined the European Economic Community. What then happened after we joined it? We were told at the time that it was going to be primarily a trading mechanism. The British people were never really made to understand and appreciate that under articles 2 and 3, it was much more than that. This was effectively the end of the sovereignty of this House. It was completely different from any other treaty that we had ever signed. Those arguments were made by Tony Benn, Michael Foot and Enoch Powell at the time. To its credit, Labour tested this in the referendum, and the British people decided to join.

Let me move on to the treaty of Nice. Although there had been a reasonably detailed debate, as I mentioned, in the mid-1950s about the benefits or otherwise of joining, this is where I believe the debates got rather weaker and there was less and less independent cost-benefit analysis of whether we should take this ever closer union further.

Article 3 of the treaty of Nice created an explicit common policy in fisheries, when it had previously been included under agriculture. An environmental policy was also created. Under the guise of strengthening competitive industry through the promotion of research and technological development, the EU acquired competence. The EU was authorised to establish and develop trans-European networks. I was here and I may be wrong, but although I certainly know that no independent analysis was done, I am not aware how much analysis of any kind was done on the costs and benefits of these very important matters that furthered the integration of Europe and our involvement in it. The treaty of Lisbon completed the process by making all remaining pillar three matters subject to EU justice-making procedure.

There was a steady increase in the area of EC and EU activity, and thus a steady increase in the number of pieces of legislation until the 1990s. Until we set up the Scrutiny Committee—which is now under the distinguished chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)—there was very little analysis of the vast plethora of legislation that was pouring out.

In a paper published by the Robert Schuman Centre, Professor Carol Harlow, of the London School of Economics, noted:

“On the regulatory side, an average of 25 directives and 600 regulations per annum in the 1970s rose to 80 directives and 1,500 thousand regulations by the early 1990s”.

In a study of the evolution of European integration, EU academics Wolfgang Wessels and Andreas Maurer observed that the increase in legislation had been accompanied by an increase in the EU’s institutional structures and sub-structures. While all that was proceeding apace, there was virtually no debate in the House of Commons or, I suspect, within the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and I were Ministers at the end of the Thatcher Government and in the Major Government. We remember going to the Council of Ministers, and we remember, as we sat there all night, a vast tide of more and more pieces of legislation which was subjected to very little, if any, independent analysis. Output peaked in 1986 with the single market legislative programme. It fell slightly after that, but it continues apace. Meanwhile, apart from the analysis conducted by the Scrutiny Committee, very little detailed analysis of what the directives involved mean for our country is available to Members of Parliament—if, indeed, they are interested, given the complexity of many of those directives.

David Morris: The figures that my hon. Friend is citing are truly frightening. Does he agree that there should be more Scrutiny Committees, and perhaps even a larger Scrutiny Committee whose members could operate a shift system when European regulation comes our way?
Sir Edward Leigh: I agree with that entirely. If we were to remain in the EU, we would need—and this would require the sort of analysis that would arise from a measure such as this Bill—to create much more impressive, comprehensive structures in order to deal with the continuing tide of legislation. People who want to remain in the EU assume that it is a static organisation. We apparently have an opt-out from ever closer union, but the European Court of Justice does not refer to ever closer union because it does not need to. If we remain in the EU, this wave of legislation will go on and on and on.

Rulings by the European Court of Justice have also given rise to a number of amendments to United Kingdom laws. One of the most significant cases in this regard was the Factortame case, which concerned the UK's obligation under EC law, and the terms of the 1985 Act of Accession whereby Spain joined the European Community, to allow Spanish fishermen to fish in UK waters within the prescribed EC quotas.

We need much more analysis, much more control, and a much more intelligent debate about what is going on, because most people in the House of Commons are blind to it. Naturally, as Members of Parliament, we are all much more interested in the great debates about assisted dying, gay marriage or hunting, or even about whether to stay in the EU or leave it, or whether to bomb Syria. We are much more concerned about those issues than about the detailed nitty-gritty of what is going on under our noses. However, it does not stop. It does not rest. The machine keeps grinding on, with very little control from Ministers and virtually no control from the House of Commons.

Let me now deal with the cost of EU membership.

Mr Chope: Before my hon. Friend does that, may I ask whether he recalls—that is an example of what he has just been talking about—that in October 2000, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is now the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, assured the world that Europe's new charter of fundamental rights would have no greater legal standing before EU judges than a copy of the Beano or The Sun?

Sir Edward Leigh: That sort of casual statement is quite worrying, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for telling us about it.

I was about to deal with the cost of EU membership. The following information is taken from various papers that I have been studying. The cost is set to be £3.1 billion higher over the next five years than forecast before the 2015 general election. This is not a static process, therefore. That change is due to a reassessment of the size of Britain's economy relative to the rest of the EU, thus penalising the UK for its economic success. The bigger and more successful we get, the greater a magnet for migrants we become and the bigger the sub we have to pay, despite the fact that the deficit carries on much the same as it always has done.

Philip Davies: On that point, is it not ironic that the Prime Minister trumpets the fact that he has managed to get a cut in the EU budget but did not mention that as a part of that cut the UK's contribution to the EU budget went up, not down?

Sir Edward Leigh: I am astonished that in this great negotiating triumph no attempt has been made to address the issue of the rebate, and I will give a few details on that in a moment. This was considered to be one of the most important issues—such as when Mrs Thatcher secured the reduction—but no attempt has been made to deal with it.

For 2016 the UK will pay £9.5 billion. It was only expected to pay £8.2 billion. Everybody casually rolls off the figure of £9 billion now as if we always thought it would be £9 billion, but it was not always going to be £9 billion; it was going to be £8.2 billion. It has suddenly gone up and nobody in the Government or elsewhere complains about that to our partners. I remember that when my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and I were Ministers everybody talked about our “European partners”. This Government seem to have dropped that; they have dropped all the visionary case for Europe in terms of partnership and so forth. They all claim they are great Eurosceptics, but they do not tell us the casual little fact that we were expected to pay £8.2 billion and that has now gone up to £9.5 billion. We are now estimated to pay just under £250 million per week for EU membership.

Civitas has debunked the Government claim that the EU makes each household better off by £3,300 per year. The Government can argue against Civitas and have an analysis of its case, but they do make that claim. It would be nice to have some analysis of where they get those figures from, but we have not been given that.

According to Open Europe, the top five costliest EU regulations enforced in the UK are: the UK renewable energy strategy, with a recurring cost of £4.7 billion a year; the capital requirements directive IV package, with a recurring cost of £4.6 billion a year; the working time directive, with a recurring cost of £4.2 billion a year. I appreciate that one of the cases made by the Labour party is that it rather likes the working time directive. That is a perfectly logical, good case to make, and I have no argument with them making it, but I would like to know—perhaps the Labour party, the Government and the people would like to know—whether this figure of a recurring cost of £4.2 billion a year is right.

The next cost in the list is the EU climate and energy package, with a recurring cost of £3.4 billion a year. I am quoting Open Europe, which may be wrong, but the Minister can debunk these arguments if he wishes. Then there is the temporary agency workers directive, with a recurring cost of £2.1 billion a year. These are not insignificant sums—£4.7 billion, £4.6 billion, £4.2 billion, £3.4 billion, £2.1 billion—but how much detailed analysis are the British people being given about any of this?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Is it not also ironic that the Labour party seems to be so enthusiastic for our membership of the EU, yet it comes to the House every month and asks that the Government do more to help the steel industry and the coal industry when it is the policies of the EU that are doing most to obliterate the steel and coal industries in the UK?

Sir Edward Leigh: I have mentioned Grimsby and fishing, but my constituency also abuts Scunthorpe. What about these poor people there? They are also going to be allowed to vote on 23 June, and are being encouraged to do so. They would rather like to know
the detailed costs of what the EU means for their jobs and what the possible alternatives are. This is serious stuff for them—it is not just a debate in the House of Commons; it is about their whole way of life and their town.

Mr Chope: Does my hon. Friend share my view that if we had been independent, we would have been able to introduce our own anti-dumping measures against cheap Chinese steel imports and to do so within six weeks, whereas this has taken the EU years?

Sir Edward Leigh: It beggars belief that whole towns can be suffering a possible wipeout and yet we are apparently putty in the hands of the Chinese. We should have stopped this on day one, as it is so serious—this is steel we are talking about.

Mark Tami: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that in truth this is about the failure of this Government, who are more interested in cosying up to the Chinese than protecting the steel industry in this country?

Sir Edward Leigh: We are impotent; it is not a question of cosying up to the Chinese, as we have no control over this. Whether we like it or not, China will be the greatest, biggest and most important economy in the world within the next 10 or 20 years. Whatever the Minister’s views, the fact that we are part of the EU means that he could do nothing to defend Scunthorpe. I accept that the Government may argue that we get other advantages, perhaps in steel, but let us have an analysis of what it all means.

Open Europe is not some sort of purely ideological campaigning group; it produces fine studies, some of the most voluminous available, and it attempts in a reasonably intellectual way to work out what staying in and leaving the EU involves. Open Europe says that according to the UK Government impact assessments, “these regulations also provide a total benefit of £58.6bn a year.”

Open Europe is trying to be fair. It goes on to say:

“However, £46bn of this benefit stems from just three items, which are vastly over-stated. For example, the stated benefit of the EU’s climate targets (£20.8bn) was dependent on a global deal to reduce carbon emissions that was never struck…Open Europe estimates that up to 95% of the benefits envisaged in the impact assessment have failed to materialise.”

Where is the Government’s response to that?

Open Europe continued by saying:

“Taking the regulations individually, the impact assessments show that Ministers signed off at least 26 of the top 100 EU-derived regulations, despite the IAs explicitly stating that the costs outweigh the estimated benefits. These regulations include the UK Temporary Agency Workers Directive and the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.

A further 31 of the costliest EU-derived regulations have not been quantified. Between the over-stated benefits, the regulations that come with a net cost and the ones with unquantified benefits, it remains unclear how many of these EU-derived rules actually come with a net benefit in reality, showing that there is plenty of scope to cut regulatory cost to business and the public sector.”

I would echo that. I may be wrong and if the Government want to argue these points in detail, I, for one, would be delighted.

Open Europe went on to say:

“Although the cost of EU regulation too high in proportion to the benefits it generates, it is important to note that these rules can bring benefits including by facilitating trade across the single market, for example in the case of financial services”.

That is an argument in favour. I fully accept that and Open Europe accepts it, but we need a genuine impact assessment of the costs and benefits of all these regulations. Where does this leave us in the total picture? My view is—[Interruption.] I would be grateful if the Whip would not speak too loudly while I am speaking. She is not supposed to be heard, unlike me. She has the real power; I can just speak.

My contention is that people are worrying too much about this decision in terms of the impact on the economy. Again, there have been many studies on this, but I do not believe that the impact on the economy of whether we stay or leave will be as dramatic as has been made out. That is “Project Fear”—that we are all going to lose our jobs and so on. According to Open Europe,

“In a worst case scenario, where the UK fails to strike a trade deal with the rest of the EU”—

thereby having to fall back on the World Trade Organisation rules—

“and does not pursue a free trade agenda”—

fairly unlikely, I would have thought, but this is the worst case scenario—

“Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would be 2.2% lower than if the UK had remained inside the EU.”

So 2.2% lower, which is quite significant, but I am not sure that we would all suddenly lose our jobs.

David Morris: The figure of 2.2% is near enough as much as the economy is expected to grow in the next 12 months. I am certain that if we leave the EU in the next few months, especially with an oil crisis on our doorstep, we could face financial catastrophe. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Sir Edward Leigh: This is the worst case scenario and I am being completely fair in putting it. I think it is unlikely.

Philip Davies: Will my hon. Friend give way briefly?

Sir Edward Leigh: Does not my hon. Friend want me to go on with the best case scenario? Then I will give way to him.

According to Open Europe,

“In a best case scenario, where the UK strikes a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EU, pursues very ambitious deregulation of its economy and opens up almost fully to trade with the rest of the world, UK GDP would be 1.6% higher than if it had stayed within the EU.

However, these are outliers. The more realistic range is between a 0.8% permanent loss to GDP in 2030—where the UK strikes a comprehensive trade deal with the EU but does nothing else—and a 0.6% permanent gain in GDP in 2030—where it pursues free trade with the rest of the world and deregulation, in addition to an EU FTA.”

These arguments about disaster and millions of jobs being lost are, I think, overstated, but I may be wrong. I keep making this point: the Government have vast resources, such as the National Audit Office and the Office for Budget Responsibility. We would like to know before we cast our vote.

Philip Davies: The Treasury now acknowledges that 3 million jobs depend on trading with the EU, not on being a member of the EU. If that is the case—I am sure there is a lot of truth in it—given our substantial
trade deficit with the European Union, does that not mean, therefore, that about 5 million jobs in the EU are dependent on its trade with the UK?

**Sir Edward Leigh:** Yes, that is the point that was made time and again during the debate yesterday. I am not sure the Government have entirely answered it to my satisfaction.

The Government seem to argue that were we to vote to leave the EU, that would be such a catastrophic snub to our EU partners that there would be a degree of vengeance. I think that is a childlike view of how policy is created in Paris and Berlin. Many people in France—I take a bit of an interest in this—have argued for many years that it would not be an absurd state of affairs for the UK to leave the EU, for all sorts of reasons. However, the Government argue that a dramatic vengeance game would be initiated.

By the way, if our European partners acted in that way, would we want to have anything to do with them? It is a ridiculous argument anyway. They would not behave in that way, because of the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies)—because of our trade deficit with them, particularly with our German friends. They are intimately bound up with us in terms of trade and there is every incentive to conclude a reasonable deal.

**Mr Chope:** It is not just about the trade issue. The Baltic states, for example, are very dependent on our NATO presence in helping them to defend themselves against the Russian threat. They would never countenance the rest of the European Union taking it out on the UK, when the UK is doing so much to defend their interests.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** Perhaps I have banged on a bit too much about the economy, and should briefly touch on defence and security, as it is in my hon. Friend’s Bill and is a matter of acute concern. Apart from “Project Fear”, which is based on this false premise of a loss of millions of jobs—Lord Mandelson appears to have made that up on the back of a fag packet—which no one has ever quantified in any great detail, although we wait to hear what the Government say about that, there are all these arguments about security. David Owen, a former Labour Foreign Secretary, who has now come out in favour of leaving the EU, dealt with that matter and debunked it very well on his interview on the “Today” programme yesterday. He asked how the European Union has improved our security by creating, in an imperialist and expansionist way, a new trade association deal with Ukraine, which led directly to Russian fears of being encircled and to the annexation of Crimea and eastern Ukraine. By the way, I do not countenance, approve or support in any way what Russia has done. The fact is that the EU gave President Putin that opportunity.

In a direct answer to my hon. Friend, is it really conceivable that, if the UK decided to leave the EU, our friends and allies in the Baltic states would want to throw us into some appalling doghouse and have nothing more to do with us when their freedom and security depends so much on us? We do have the strongest armed forces in the European Union. France and Britain are the only two countries that are capable of deploying world power. The Minister who is summing up this debate has considerable expertise in this matter because, as a Back Bencher, he spent years talking about it.

Although I cannot speak for the French Government, I do regularly speak to people in France, and I can assure Members that France has no interest or desire in not continuing to co-operate in an ever closer way, in terms of an ever closer union of sovereign states, in military policy. This whole argument that, somehow, the peace and security of Europe would be endangered if we were to leave the EU does not hold water. I will not repeat all the arguments that have been made many times before about our peace and security depending not on remaining in the EU, but on NATO. That is not a point that can be directly summed up in any cost-benefit analysis, but it needs to be articulated. We Eurosceptics are not nationalists. We love Europe; we love Europeans; we love European culture; and we want to have the closest possible relationship with our friends in France and Germany.

Let us go back to some of the detailed studies of the cost-benefit analysis. I am very grateful to the Library of the House of Commons for this. In fact, we should pay tribute to it because it is one of the few bodies that has actually attempted, with its limited resources, to collate all these studies. The study by the Institute for Economic Affairs—Minford et al, 2005—“Should Britain leave the EU” estimates a range of 3.2% to minus 3.7% of GDP in ongoing costs. I have dealt with Open Europe. The 2014 study by Gianmarco Ottaviano “Brexit or Fixit? The Trade and Welfare Effects of Leaving the European Union”, the Centre for Economic Performance and the London School of Economics estimated the trade-related costs to the UK of leaving the EU as being in the range of 2.2% to 9.5% of GDP. That is their argument, but it would be nice for it to be tested. In the literature review for “Our Global Future”, the CBI—again, I am not citing people who are naturally friendly to my point of view, but we need to test the arguments—found that the net benefit arising from EU membership is somewhere in the region of 4% to 5% of UK GDP.

**Philip Davies:** Does my hon. Friend have the figures that the CBI gave for the great benefits that we would have received when it recommended that we join the euro?

**Sir Edward Leigh:** We should have had more independent analysis of that. Conservative Members often criticise Gordon Brown, but we should never forget that he kept us out of the euro, against the wishes of his Prime Minister, Tony Blair. We were told that disaster would strike by some in the City of London, the CBI and so on, and they used precisely these arguments. Now the Prime Minister goes to the Dispatch Box and says as a great virtue that we are out of the euro, but we were told by all the powers of the establishment that not joining the euro would be a disaster, and many of the arguments used were exactly the same.

**Mr Chope:** Roger Bootle told the Treasury Committee on 27 October last year:

“A large number of supposedly very highly qualified people argued that there would be a mass exodus of the financial services industry if Britain were not in the euro. It did not happen. In fact, the reverse happened: it was the provincial continental financial centres that suffered, as business concentrated on London.”

**Sir Edward Leigh:** The Mayor of London and the Conservative mayoral candidate represent, or hope to represent, the powerhouse of the British economy.
Presumably they deal with and talk to businesses in London every day, and significantly they have both decided that London would not be disadvantaged by leaving the EU.

I am not necessarily quoting people who are friends of mine, but in evidence to an inquiry by the Lords EU Committee into relaunching the single market on 27 July 2010, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills stated that:

“EU countries trade twice as much with each other as they would do in the absence of the Single Market Programme”.

That is based on the argument that increased trade with Europe since the early 1980s may be responsible for UK income per head being around 6% higher.

That is fair enough. We accept that we want to recreate the single market in some form. However, the Government immediately replied, “Well, I’m sorry but the rules of the EU are absolutely clear. If you want to be part of the single market, you have to accept free movement of people.” But that is not necessarily true. For example, it does not apply to Canada. As I understand it, Canada has created a good trade deal with the EU, but I am not aware that EU nationals are allowed to travel freely to Canada without a visa—I have some knowledge of this because my wife has a Canadian passport as she was born in Montreal.

The argument about what sort of access we would have in the single market is so crucial that we must have some independent analysis. Otherwise, we are making a decision based not on facts, but on prejudice. Those of us who argue from a Eurosceptic point of view are not in any way trying to convince the British people that they should make this choice in terms of nationalism, although many will, and that is their prerogative. We are arguing that there is a perfectly good, legitimate, intellectual, rational case for leaving the EU, but we want it to be tested by the Government.

I had better sit down as I have probably wearied you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I want to end with a study, which people here will not be aware of, commissioned by the Bertelsmann Stiftung of Munich—so this is not, as far as I am aware, some sort of UK Independence front organisation, but a well-respected German institution. It is interesting that people around Europe—Stiftung in Germany and think-tanks elsewhere in Europe—are starting to take seriously the prospect of the United Kingdom leaving the EU. They are also writing studies that could form part of the independent cost-benefit analysis we want the Government to do.

In the second and third columns of its detailed analysis of what countries pay into and get out of the EU, the Stiftung demonstrates that Germany, the United Kingdom and France are the biggest absolute net contributors, paying in about 0.5% of their gross national income. Eleven of the 28 member states were net contributors in the 2013 budget, and the Stiftung gives various detailed figures for member states’ gross contributions. In terms of net contributions as a share of GNI, we always come second to Germany.

The Stiftung says:

“Because the United Kingdom benefits relatively little from CAP expenditures (for example, it received only £3.16 billion in 2013 compared to France’s €8.58 billion), Margaret Thatcher negotiated the introduction of a ‘UK rebate’ in 1984. At its core, this contains a refund of approximately 2/3 of the United Kingdom’s annual net contributions to the EU budget. For the years 2011-2013, the rebate averaged around €4.1 billion. A correction in how the rebate is calculated was introduced in 2008, which reduces the rebate depending on the costs of the EU expansion. According to forecasts by the UK’s economic and finance ministry—the rebate will hover around an average of €6 billion”.

The Stiftung provides various detailed figures and illustrates how the UK’s net contribution has risen. It says:

“One key element of the Brexit debate is that net payments have increased sharply since the global financial and economic crisis in 2008…If the United Kingdom exits the EU on January 1, 2018, this will change how the EU budget is financed”—that must be the understatement of the year. It continues:

“According to estimates by the UK’s economic and finance ministry”—

Her Majesty’s Treasury—

“the United Kingdom will pay a net contribution of £8 billion for fiscal year April 2017-April 2018.”

These arguments are therefore being set out in detailed papers by think-tanks throughout Europe, but here—in the most important decision this country will make, in just four months’ time—the Government are apparently telling us that they do not believe there should be any independent cost-benefit analysis of what that decision will mean for the United Kingdom. Shame on them!

1.7 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): This is the first time I have intervened in the European debate, and hon. Members can rest assured that one thing I will not be talking about is the future of the hedgehog, or le hérisson, as I think it is called in French.

This is probably one of the biggest, most controversial issues we will deal with as a country, and I am acutely aware that a number of my hon. Friends take a completely different position from the one that I will espouse during my speech. I would also say that this issue—like the corn laws, free trade and imperial preference—is one of the big issues in British history. Of course, this, too, is a big trade issue, and we have to take that into account.

Over the last 15 years, as the parliamentary candidate for the Plymouth Sutton seat and, more recently, as the Member of Parliament for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, I have always sought to take a rather pragmatic attitude to what our relationship with Europe should be; I do not start from the basis of a set view of how we should proceed. I very much support what the Prime Minister has been able to do in the way of bringing back reform. The big issue of Europe kicked off when Jacques Delors said how important it was that the single market was not just about money but employment regulations and stuff like that too. I want the UK to be in Europe but not run by Europe. Now that the Prime Minister has finished his negotiations and presented his very strong plan for Europe, I have decided that I will vote to remain in the EU in the referendum on 23 June. I want to make it abundantly clear that I have exactly the same influence as every single one of my constituents or, for that matter, anybody in the whole of the United Kingdom. I have one vote, no more and no less.

To my mind, Britain’s role in Europe is to maintain the balance of power, and that is utterly crucial. Over the
course of history, when we have walked away from Europe, we have had to go back in and sweep up the whole mess. We have invested time, money and blood in that relationship with Europe, and now is not the time for us to wash our hands of our allies and turn back.

Mr Chope: What does my hon. Friend think about the interventions this week by Lord Owen and Lord Howard, both of whom take a similar view to his but seem to have reached a different conclusion?

Oliver Colvile: Well, that is the whole business of politics, isn’t it? My hon. Friend is right to raise these issues, but ultimately this is about the future of our country within Europe and whether we are led back into having wars and things like that. I very much want to avoid that. Believe you me, my heart is for coming out, but my head says that it is not a clever thing to do.

Last week, during the recess, I spent a few days with the Royal Marines and the Royal Navy in Norway doing a survival course. We ended up building a shelter and a fire, and then we had to go and kill a chicken and eat it. Needless to say, I did not get too involved in the killing of the chicken, because I think I would have found that incredibly difficult. I heard at first hand the Norwegians’ real concerns, shared by the Baltic states, about the whole business of Russia potentially invading their country and coming through the north and the Arctic in order to do so. That made me very concerned as well. I therefore believe that our national security should not be weakened at a time of global insecurity.

Philip Davies: Does my hon. Friend not understand that controlling immigration means that we would be able to allow into the country those we want to allow in and that we could keep out those we want to keep out? If we leave the EU and his hospital needs some nurses from abroad, there would be nothing to prevent us from allowing them to come here. We just would not have to accept everybody from the EU who wants to come here.

Oliver Colvile: My hon. Friend has a point, but it is important that we acknowledge that this country needs people to come here to do those jobs.

Mr Chope: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Oliver Colvile: I am afraid not.

Businesses in Plymouth rely on the UK’s deep links. My constituency has a global reputation for marine science and engineering research. Representatives from the Plymouth marine laboratory and from maritime organisations have told me that it is important that we continue to have links to Europe. University students in my constituency also want to be able to travel abroad. I am afraid that I have doubts about what the alternative would be if we were to leave.

Babcock, which runs the dockyard in my constituency, signed a letter to The Financial Times, saying that it is very important that we stay in. One of the big boat manufacturers in my constituency explained to me a couple of weeks ago how difficult it is to sell boats to south America. The company has to pay a 15% premium and it is very concerned about what would happen in France and Greece if we left. They would want to protect their own businesses and boat-building industries. That is another reason that I find it difficult to deal with this whole debate.

Philip Colvile: I am fully aware of my hon. Friend’s view that everything in the EU is about peace and harmony. Has he seen the rise of the far-right parties across the EU in recent years, including the largest party in France, and the record amounts of barbed wire going up around the EU? It does not strike many people as being about peace and harmony but quite the reverse in many cases.

Oliver Colvile: In my constituency, we have a global reputation for marine science, and we should most certainly welcome that. I am, however, keen for further reform of the EU, including bringing UK fishing waters back under UK control, for which I will certainly continue to campaign. That would significantly improve the conservation of our fisheries, which I am very happy to support.

I believe that the Prime Minister’s deal will go a long way to restoring British sovereignty and reducing migration to the UK. On future immigration, if we are going to put up the shutters—we do need to control it—I am concerned about what would happen to my local Derriford hospital. If we found ourselves without any nurses from abroad, that would be a significant issue.

Philip Davies: Does my hon. Friend not understand that controlling immigration means that we would be able to allow into the country those we want to allow in and that we could keep out those we want to keep out? If we leave the EU and his hospital needs some nurses from abroad, there would be nothing to prevent us from allowing them to come here. We just would not have to accept everybody from the EU who wants to come here.

Oliver Colvile: My hon. Friend has a point, but it is important that we acknowledge that this country needs people to come here to do those jobs.

Mr Chope: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Oliver Colvile: I am afraid not.

Britain has a proud history of playing its part in Europe, and I want it to continue to play an important role in reforming Europe while also promoting its interests worldwide. The terms Europhile and Eurosceptic are thrown about quite a bit, but I am neither. I am not Euro-suicidal but a Euro-realist, and that is why I will be voting to remain in the EU.

1.18 pm

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), who is not present but whose Bill this is, for giving us the opportunity to once again debate the merits or otherwise of the European Union.

I think we should have a cost-benefit analysis of this debate, given that right at the beginning—it has been going on for some three hours—we were told that it was highly unlikely that the Bill would be taken any further, because that would require the referendum to be delayed. It is, therefore, a complete waste of everybody’s time and of taxpayers’ money.

Mr Chope: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Pat Glass: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could tell us how much this debate has cost the taxpayer.
Mr Chope: May I ask the hon. Lady whether that is her best point?

Pat Glass: No, but I think it is worth saying. We have sat here for three hours, and we have heard Members talk for at least an hour about a Bill that they do not intend to take any further. As the Bill is about a cost-benefit analysis, perhaps we can have a cost-benefit analysis of this morning for the taxpayers of this country.

Oliver Colvile: My great grandfather was a rural vicar in Oxfordshire. He said that he did not mind his congregation looking at their watches; it was when they started shaking them that he became concerned. I feel that that is something we should take on board.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I assure you that I am beginning to look at my watch.

Pat Glass: That is helpful. As the hon. Gentleman has spoken about his great grandfather, I will talk about mine a little later. / Interruption. / Would the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) like to say something about my great grandfather? I will talk about him later, and perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to intervene then.

Oliver Colvile: I would like the hon. Lady to talk about her great grandfather.

Pat Glass: I will do so later.

We had a long debate on European affairs yesterday. I am sure we would all agree that it was an excellent debate with many outstanding contributions. The debate has felt a little flat today, because we have returned to the usual suspects with the usual very narrow arguments. However, it gives me an opportunity to talk once again about the benefits of being a member of the European Union. I do not think—this is one of our criticisms of the Bill—that the benefits of being a member of the European Union can be narrowed down to simply an economic cost. The question is much bigger than that.

Labour, as hon. Members know, are united on this issue. We believe that Britain is stronger, safer and more prosperous as part of the European Union.

Philip Davies: Is that it?

Pat Glass: No; just a second. We are a proud nation, with almost half our exports going to European countries. Those exports were worth £227 billion last year to the UK economy. We receive, on average, £26.5 billion of investment every year from the EU. Jobs and businesses, large and small, depend on our trading with the EU. Future EU trade could create 790,000 more jobs by 2030 by opening up markets in digital services, energy and tourism.

I will talk a little about my part of the country. The north-east is the only part of the country that has a trade surplus. Proportionately, we are the biggest exporting region in the country. We make things in my part of the world and we export them, largely to Europe. As I said yesterday, we make more cars in one city in the north-east in a month than that great car-building country, Italy, does in a whole year. I invite Conservative Members to go along to Teesport or the port of Tyne and see the lines of cars that are made in the north-east and exported to the European Union. In my region, 75% of our trade depends on being part of the European Union. Hundreds of thousands of jobs in the north-east are directly or indirectly linked to being part of the European Union. That is just one aspect of the benefits.

I will talk about the peace dividend later, but I want to talk a little about the fact that we live in a global world where we face issues such as international terrorism, international crime, war, migration and Russian expansionism. Listening to the debate today, I have not heard anything from Conservative Members that gives me any answers to the big questions facing us. It is not possible to reduce those huge issues to a cost-benefit analysis or an economic cost.

TTIP has been mentioned. I have to say that my blood runs cold at the thought of negotiating a TTIP arrangement outside the European Union. I am quite clear that our public services and our NHS need to be protected in any negotiations about TTIP. Having listened to the libertarians opposite, I am sure that that would not be the case.

David Morris: On negotiating TTIP within Europe, it is my understanding that that point is a non-issue, especially in relation to the NHS, as has been clarified many times during the past three years. Will the hon. Lady elaborate on that point?

Pat Glass: In such negotiations, it is clear that we are much more likely to get a TTIP agreement with red lines around our public services and the NHS as part of the European Union. If we were outside the European Union and negotiating such a treaty directly with the USA, I would not be so confident that that would be the priority of the current Government.

David Morris: For the record, does the Opposition agree that there will be protection for the NHS under TTIP within the European framework as it stands?

Pat Glass: We agree that if there is to be a TTIP agreement, it is much better to negotiate it with Britain as part of the European Union.

We have talked a lot about sovereignty in recent weeks. Many of us would agree that we have in various ways negotiated on our sovereignty in order to be part of something bigger. We have given up part of our sovereignty in defence to be part of organisations such as NATO, and we have done the same with the UN. On a personal level, when I married—I have been married for 30 years—I gave up some of my sovereignty over decisions that I would have made myself to be part of something that I accepted was bigger and better for both of us. The principle is very clear: in order to be part of something better, we sometimes have to give up things we want to hang on to. That is true of our sovereignty. I do not believe that this country has given away our sovereignty. It is very clear that whenever decisions are made in the European Union, they come back to and come under the sovereignty of this House.

On immigration, one of the huge strengths of this country—it has made us one of the strongest, richest, most powerful and greatest countries in the world—has been our ability, over centuries, to absorb and integrate millions of immigrants, migrants, people fleeing oppression and economic migrants. My family were economic refugees who came to this country during the Irish famine in the mid-19th century. Such people came to this country and
worked hard for it. They brought up their children in this country, and paid their taxes. They fought for this country and, frankly, some of them died for this country. That is part of what makes this country a great country it is. To the idea that we can close the doors to people who will work in our NHS or our schools, I would say that that is part of what has kept this country rich. This country has got rich and stayed rich on immigration. We need to be very careful when talking about closing the doors to people, particularly those from the European Union.

Mr Chope: I do not think anyone has talked about closing the doors. We have talked about giving equal access on the basis of merit to foreigners regardless of whether they are from the EU or from outside the EU. For example, the hospital in my area tried to recruit nurses from the Philippines because they are well qualified for its needs, but it was unable to do so because priority has to be given to EU nurses.

Pat Glass: If we look at EU immigration, we can see that it is almost the same: 2.3 million people from the European Union are in Britain; and 2 million Brits live in the European Union. Many of them are working in and contributing to European countries and some of them, having worked hard all their lives, have retired and are now living in the European Union. We must be absolutely clear about what “out” would look like for those people. At the end of this debate, I want us to be very clear about that. We know what “in” looks like—we have had 41 years of what “in” looks like—but we absolutely no idea what “out” would look like for jobs and the economy, or for people from the EU working in this country and people from this country working in the EU.

Philip Davies: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Pat Glass: If the hon. Gentleman is going to tell us what “out” would look like, I will happily give way.

Philip Davies: I am rather interested in the Labour party’s views. I urge the hon. Lady to look up the meaning of net migration. Net migration means the number of people coming in after we have taken out the ones who have already left, and that figure is 325,000. Is her party happy with the net migration figures as they are? Is she not prepared to take any measures to reduce them?

Pat Glass: Once again, another opportunity to tell us what “out” would look like and we do not get it.

We had an excellent debate in the Chamber yesterday, a lot of which centred on the peace dividend. I have not heard anything about that from Conservative Members today. The first aim of the European Union was peace. It was created not as a project or a political union, but to ensure peace in western Europe after the ruins of 1945. We committed genocide on one another in western Europe every 30 years up until 1945. As I said in the Chamber yesterday, for me this is personal. It is not just about politics. I accept that the European Union is not the only reason why young men and women are not lying in graves outside Thiepval and Ypres today, unlike my great grandfather and his brother, two young men from this country aged 22 and 25 who died within six weeks of each other and are lying in unmarked graves in Belgium and France.
in the European Union”. I think there are only two copies left: the one I have in my hand, and the one proudly owned by my mother, who is the only other person I know who has definitely read it. I flicked through it to remind myself of my frustration that the country did not scrutinise enough of what was going on in Brussels—this was before 2010, when we were in opposition.

The pamphlet asked what Parliament could do to better understand what was happening in Brussels. We spend a lot of time in this place arguing and complaining about the results of legislation coming from Brussels, but how much time do we invest in understanding the mechanisms and processes in order that we might challenge or stop it coming through in the first place?

Oliver Colvile: Does my hon. Friend recognise that we also need to send good-quality civil servants to Europe to argue our case properly?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I would argue that the civil servants we send there are among the best in the world. It is a huge privilege and honour to work in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, although many of the civil servants in Brussels come from other Departments.

I must say, however, that we are granted 12% of the jobs in the EU, in the various Commission roles and so forth, but, of late, we have not taken them, because there are language exams to be taken, and the language school in the Foreign Office was closed down. There were important top jobs to be had, but because our civil servants could not pass the two language courses required—one at a higher level, one at a more subsidiary level—we could not fill the very roles that would have allowed us the necessary influence in the EU, in the bowels of Brussels, to change, affect and advance legislation.

I am pleased to say that we are changing that—the language school is back in place and able to train civil servants to the correct levels—but when I wrote the pamphlet, before the 2010 election, we were filling only 3% to 4% of those jobs, meaning that 8% of the jobs to which Britain was entitled were going to other countries. One is supposed to relinquish one’s passport—metaphorically—when one becomes a civil servant in the EU, but of course one remains British at heart, or Italian or French, or whatever it is. It was a waste of an opportunity to scrutinise, understand and affect what was going on in the EU. I am pleased to say that the civil service situation has changed, and that we are now far more immersed in Brussels.

Let us look at some of the big ticket items that have been agreed—I shall come on to them in more detail in the longer term, which is exactly what the Prime Minister was trying to determine in his negotiations at the weekend. He explained what he returned with in his statement on Monday.

I am pleased that we have had yet another opportunity this week to debate these matters, and I am sure it will not be the last time. I am most grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who articulated important questions about the merits of the European Union which need to be answered by those who want to remain in the EU. That is important for the public, many of whom are yet to make up their minds on the merits of the European Union.

We heard contributions from other Members, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, who articulated important questions about the merits of the European Union which need to be answered by those who want to remain in the EU. That is important for the public, many of whom are yet to make up their minds on the merits of the European Union or of continuing our membership of the European Union.

The speech of the day was, I thought, given by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), our understanding of these matters is important. When I was the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister for Europe, I remember organising cross-party visits for Members of Parliament to make the trip to Brussels so that they could learn about the EU, meet civil servants and understand how the European Parliament and various parts of the Commission work. Most of them were so delighted to get back on the Eurostar at the end of the day that they never wanted to see Brussels again, such was the scale of the bureaucracy. That highlights a challenge, but it perhaps also reflects the absence of a determination to say that we should be turning the situation around. We should not simply turn our backs on it and accept everything that happens; we should try to enhance British influence over what happens in Europe.

That is exactly what our Prime Minister has done in working with our allies and trying to effect change for the better. There are many countries, many Prime Ministers and many statesmen who agree with our free market liberal views on how the European Union should be conducted. They agree with us that it has become too politically empowered and not sufficiently transparent, and that although it is the largest single market in the world, it is becoming overburdened with red tape and bureaucracy. From a social perspective, furthermore, it is the most costly area in the world. Some 50% of social services in the world are found on our own doorstep in the European Union. That means that we are uncompetitive in comparison with other places in the longer term, which is exactly what the Prime Minister was trying to determine in his negotiations at the weekend. He explained what he returned with in his statement on Monday.

I am pleased that we have had yet another opportunity this week to debate these matters, and I am sure it will not be the last time. I am most grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch for stepping in for our hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), who was originally going to articulate his views on the Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch has done so with the same gusto that he has always shown in previous debates on the European Union. It is a matter of record and knowledge that he is my parliamentary Dorset neighbour, and I look forward to him donning one of the amazing ties that the leave campaign is promoting and going on the campaign trail in Dorset in the run-up to 23 June.

We heard contributions from other Members, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who articulated important questions about the merits of the European Union which need to be answered by those who want to remain in the EU. That is important for the public, many of whom are yet to make up their minds on the merits of the European Union or of continuing our membership of the European Union.
consequences of leaving. It was very honest of him to pose those questions, and the nation must hear the answers in a proper debate.

The “Project Fear” label has crept into the discussion many times. We want to win the arguments because people have decided on the merits—the whys and wherefores—of both sides, rather than because they were unclear about the position, or because one side had decided to scaremonger. What worries me is that this might descend into something like an American presidential election campaign, in which the negative overshadows the positives and the educated points of view.

My hon. Friend also raised a number of specific questions, and I shall come to those later.

I am pleased to say that that my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) managed to get hedgehogs into yet another debate, although he was not intending to talk about a subject for which he has become famous. He also made the point that this is one of the biggest debates that we will ever have, and that it is therefore right for us to devote time and energy to looking at all the details.

I am saddened that more Members have not taken the time to join us on a Friday. I do not know where the Scottish nationalists are, but at least the Labour Front Benchers have made it, and I am pleased about that. In any event, I am sure that Members will have further opportunities to debate these matters in due course.

As I said earlier, we had a full and wide-ranging debate on Europe yesterday, opened by the Foreign Secretary. One speech that was pivotal, and stood out, was the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames). It was a powerful oration, not least because my right hon. Friend mentioned his grandfather. As Members will know, his grandfather, looking at the mess of Europe, was concerned about how countries could integrate to the point at which they were no longer independent but interdependent, and would therefore never go down the road towards war again.

Sir Edward Leigh: May I take up that point about history, for the sake of the record? In his own very good speech, my right hon. Friend did indeed refer to his grandfather’s speech. Winston Churchill was always a robust defender of European unity, but he made it absolutely clear that what he foresaw was continental European unity. No one has ever been able to find any quotation from Winston Churchill suggesting that Britain should join a European union.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend has made my point for me. What I think our right hon. Friend was trying to articulate was, “Please do not try to second-guess what would be the view of someone who is not alive today and able to understand the issues of today.” He made the point, very powerfully, that it was disingenuous to try to judge in that way. He was frustrated that people had taken the famous Zurich speech—of which we are now in the 70th anniversary year, and in which Churchill talked of a continental Europe—out of context, and had reinterpreted it in order to make their own points. In fact, it has already been used by both sides in the debate leading up to 23 June. Similarly, people have said of Margaret Thatcher, “I am sure that, if she were alive today, she would say this, that and the other.”

I think it unhelpful to lean on great statesmen who are not here today, because today’s circumstances are very different.

It is, however, worth reminding ourselves that from the devastation of war-torn Europe has emerged a union of 28 nations, which are living in peace now, and which have also lived through a ragged period of dealing with the growth and subsequent demise of communism. We have become part of the biggest and most powerful single market in the world, and it is important for us to remember that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough also gives me licence to touch on how this is playing out in other European capitals. Things can be quite parochial in the Chamber, and sometimes the things that we say here do not reach much further, but we are being watched, registered and monitored in other capitals across the world as we have this debate. I have to say from my role as Foreign Minister responsible for the middle east, north Africa and south-east Asia that there is some puzzlement about this debate, as Britain has a legacy of being at the forefront of decision making—being a P5 UN Security Council member, a leading member of the Commonwealth and playing such a pivotal role in NATO, and given that in every international organisation from the World Trade Organisation to the International Monetary Fund to the World Bank, Britain is at the forefront.

Other countries hesitate and look at us to see which direction Britain is looking in, knowing that we have a powerful, strong and important relationship with the US, that we have experience, and that we have an interest in, and understanding of, much of the world around us, yet they also look at us and see that we might want to opt out of one of the largest organisations in the world. The Prime Minister also articulated that point on Monday.

We do not make any reference to the fact that the UK could survive outside the EU. We are a great and powerful nation—the fifth biggest trading nation in the world. The question is the degree of that success. That is what we need to debate up until 23 June. Are we better off out and making decisions separately, or are we more powerful as part of this organisation and collectively exerting more influence from inside, or are we more powerful in the debate we will have in the next three months.

Much has also been made about the security concerns and whether Britain’s security status and competence would rise or fall were we to leave the EU. When the starting gun was fired, and the debate opened up and people declared their position, some comments were made about the Paris attacks, saying that they would be more likely to take place in the UK if we were outside the EU. I think those comments were disingenuous; I will not go further than that. We need to have a sensible and measured discussion about security. I certainly do not agree with that sentiment at all, and I urge those on both sides of the argument to be very cautious about making flippant comments and scaremongering. We are of course subject to the pressures of the media and the sensationalism they seem to encourage so that they have soundbites for the evening news or the Twittersphere, but our allies are looking at this and it does not bode well for Britain if we scaremonger in this way.

However, we are living in a very dangerous and complex world, one that is far more complex today than it was a couple of decades ago. The consequences of the
Arab spring are still with us, we have an emboldened President Putin—far more unpredictable than ever before—and we have the growing concern of extremism. When the Bali bomb went off in 2002 there were just over 20 listed extremist groups—listed groups of terror. Today there are over 50. These are registered, listed groups recognised by us as organisations of terror. That means that at the moment we are not winning the battle to contain them. Daesh is obviously the biggest, and it is a franchise; other organisations, such as Boko Haram, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, are joining forces and gaining a franchise from Daesh. We need to think about how we collectively defeat that, and there is a question about the role of the EU in dealing with that.

Much has been said about the role of NATO—it was mentioned today. It is, of course, the cornerstone of our security endeavours, and we also have our strong relationship with the United States, but along with the growth of the European Union comes soft power. These things complement each other, and one does not replace the other. In certain areas where other countries are wanting to pursue a European-style army, we have made it clear that we would not support that, and neither would many other countries. Everybody has recognised that from a kinetic perspective NATO is the cornerstone of our security, but soft power comes with the ability to provide political leverage in introducing sanctions, and it is the work of the European Union that started the ball rolling in getting sanctions built up against Iran. Those sanctions eventually forced Iran to curtail its nuclear programme, come to the table and agree a long-term solution which denies the Iranians the ability to build a nuclear bomb. EU sanctions and EU discussions led to the P5+1 talks, which involved other countries such as China, Russia and the United States. That gives us an indication of the role the EU can play, and the counter-piracy operations off Somalia are another great example of this work, which can complement what NATO is doing.

We also need to consider the bilateral operations that work underneath the umbrella of the European Union, for example, the Border Force capabilities in Calais. One could argue that if we step out of the European Union, we could negotiate these things one by one, but carrying out bilateral talks with a number of countries is a lot more complex. The question is: would such an approach be as efficient as going to a single organisation—Interpol, Frontex or the European border forces—and at these meetings having a say not just in bilateral arrangements, such as those we have with France, but collectively? Internationally, what is the European Union’s view on the situation in Libya, with the movement of refugees and with the criminal gangs exhorting funds from refugees who wish to make the perilous journey across the Mediterranean? My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley posed the question as to the impact of extremist parties in Europe, as it could be argued that that has been a consequence of the movement of refugees. But the only way we are going to sort that is by dealing with the problem at source—by addressing what is happening in Syria. Again, I would argue that the EU can put far greater emphasis and might into providing a challenge and looking for solutions by working collectively, not only on managing the refugee crisis, but on addressing the challenges at source in order to mitigate what is going on.

Philip Davies: Everyone would agree that the Minister is making a balanced and good speech, but I am surprised that he seems to be talking down the ability of the mighty Foreign Office, of which he is a part. Is he really saying that if, after we had left the EU, the UK and the EU thought that sanctions should be imposed on Iran, the Foreign Office would have no mechanism for discussing that with the European Union, and coming to that decision and agreement? Is he saying that those discussions can take place only from within the EU? Since when has the Foreign Office been so pathetically powerless around the world?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to know that his description of the Foreign Office is not one I agree with—

Philip Davies: It is your description—

Mr Ellwood: It is not my description. Provocatively, my hon. Friend is putting words in my mouth. We can step back from this particular issue to all the other issues, saying that in each case Britain would have the ability—in fact, we would have the obligation—outside the EU to step up and do all that work as well, whether it be on sanctions on Iran or any other relationships. The question is: on our own, can we exert greater leverage on a country such as Iran, which continues to have a proxy influence in Bahrain, Damascus and Syria, Baghdad and Iraq, and Yemen and Sana’a, or would we have more leverage and power by leading from within the EU? That applies right across the board.

Mr Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the way in which he is responding to the debate. May I ask him about the Syrian refugees? I think our Prime Minister and our Government have the right idea in saying, “Let’s take the refugees from the area of the theatre, rather than encouraging them to make the dangerous journey to Europe.” Why does my hon. Friend think the European Union has not been prepared to listen and respond positively to that common-sense approach from our Government?

Mr Ellwood: I am not sure that is quite correct. Federica Mogherini, who leads on these matters for the European Union, is very much in alignment with that view. We discussed these things in Rome recently when we looked at Syrian and Iraq matters. My hon. Friend is right to say that there are a number of challenges—first, the genuine Syrian refugees caught up in the region. We should pay tribute to Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other countries, for the massive burden that they have taken on. We have chosen to support those refugees who are most vulnerable. The challenge that has come across Europe comes not just from Syrians. Mixed in with them are Afghans and others from Africa, taking advantage of the patterns of migratory flow. We have said that if we open our doors to them, we are likely to encourage more. That is why we have been very firm.

The consequence is that thousands are still coming in across Europe every day and we need a solution to deal with that. If my hon. Friend visits Greece now, he will
see the scale of the challenge there. On beaches that should be for holidaymakers, there are migrant camps and individuals everywhere, some in transit and some having put up a temporary home. EU countries are affected by that, which is why collectively we need a better solution.

Central to that is solving the problem so that people do not feel they want to turn their back on their country, thereby making it all the weaker. Many of the people who can make it and are making it to Europe are the ones with mobile phones, the ones who are fed and have a family. I do not doubt that they are going through an horrific time, but many of them are educated and if they depart from Syria, they deny it the doctors, nurses and engineers that will be needed once the guns fall silent and the country starts to rebuild itself.

Sir Edward Leigh: May I say that the Minister is replying to the debate extremely well? It just shows that sometimes there is an advantage in having to wait a bit before one gets on to the Front Bench because one understands this place better.

May I ask my hon. Friend a serious question about the refugees from Syria? I put this point to the Prime Minister and I am not sure I got an adequate reply. I want the Minister to try and deal with it. I am not so worried about east European migrants to this country because they work hard and integrate. I am extremely worried about the millions pouring in from the middle east, including Syria. I said to the Prime Minister that Merkel’s million would all have a right to come here once they get passports. The Prime Minister said that only 2% of people coming into Germany get passports.

The Minister cannot give me an answer now, but will the Foreign Office do some more work on this? Based on history, I think a much higher proportion of those pouring into Germany now will get passports. I would like the Foreign Office to keep an eye on this because those people would have a right to come here and it is an important issue.

Mr Ellwood: The first thing that has to be acknowledged is that the normal processes in place across Europe for dealing with refugees applying for status are going to be tested, because of the scale of the migration that we are dealing with. Under Germany’s current rules, they would have to wait a number of years—eight years, I think, but I stand to be corrected—before they can gain a passport. If they have a criminal record, they will not get a passport. So there is automatically a delay in the process of securing a passport. The German analysis is that in such a time frame, many will hope to return home or to remain in Germany. We need to keep the problem in context. If they are in Germany, have a German passport and receive benefits there, why would they want to come to the UK? These are big questions, but they are for further down the line. They should not be ducked. The scale of what we are dealing with is unprecedented since the movement of populations after the second world war.

I should just mention that much of the focus of the Syria conference that took place in the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre was on some of those questions as well. We raised an unprecedented amount of money—$11 billion was pledged in one day—from the international community. I spoke at one of the non-governmental organisation conferences, and much of the energy was focused on how the European Union deals with such challenges. If I am honest, the EU could be regarded as a fair weather organisation: when economies are doing well, that is all fine and good, but when something such as Ukraine comes up, that is when the mechanics of bringing countries together to achieve consensus has yet to be tested. That is where the European Union is having to learn far faster than NATO, which, from a security perspective, had the machinery in place to be able to react to these events on a more regular basis. None the less, my hon. Friend raises an important point.

I just want to talk a little about the consequences of exit, which is what this Bill is all about. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, we would have to delay the referendum. There is a trigger notice in article 50, which would prompt negotiation. A country cannot simply walk out of the European Union, nor can it tear up its membership card as one can do, presumably, with a political party. It needs to apply to leave, and in the good old European Union way there is a process to be followed. That process can last up to two years. It also requires the support of the 27 members, and that can take time. With all this, there is a question for those who are advocating departure: if the process were to last more than 24 months, what happens to businesses and where do they fit in? What will happen to deals, negotiations and reputations? How does the City of London continue to attract business if there is a question mark over the departure date—and that is before we have even considered what we might be entering into.

Michael Howard’s comments were referred to this morning. He talked about renegotiating to get back in. So, let us say that a country manages to get out of the EU in two years, it then might have to begin negotiations to get back in again. It took Switzerland eight years to consolidate its deal. That is time consuming. Arguably, the process can be faster. We are a far bigger country than Switzerland or Norway, so the process could be expedited. Again, there will be delays. There is a question mark over where we actually stand and what our relationship is.

It is just worth mentioning article 49, which does not get as much press as article 50 in the European treaty. It says:

“Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union.”

Article 49 is all about what a country does to regain its membership. It says:

“The European Parliament and national Parliaments shall be notified of this application.”

All the national Parliaments then have a debate and discussion about a future British application.

The applicant State shall address its application to the Council, which shall act unanimously after consulting the Commission and after receiving the consent of the European Parliament”.

So the country needs unanimous support. If one country were to say to us, “No, you can’t come back in on those terms” then we are stuck. Also, anybody who knows the European Parliament knows that it has myriad views.
Mr Ellwood: Because as I understand, the heart of the argument from the leave campaign recognises that some aspects of the European Union are welcome, such as the single market and some aspects of the security situation, and that there would be a desire for re-entry so that we could have that relationship. [ Interruption. ]

What I heard on the radio this morning is that we would renegotiate aspects of our relationship with the European Union—I have heard that again and again. If my hon. Friends are saying, “No, we will have no truck with the European Union whatsoever”, that is a new direction of travel that I have not heard before, so I am grateful that the debate has clarified what the leave campaign has been after for all this time.

Philip Davies: Is the Minister aware that many countries have free trade agreements with the European Union without being members of it, an example being the agreement that America is seeking to make at the moment? The future for the United Kingdom is to have free trade with the European Union from outside it, in the way that many other big countries do. Does the Minister understand that?

Mr Ellwood: I will heed the advice and encouragement, because other issues have been raised that we must also touch on. Let me be clear: there is a fair bit of bureaucracy to be gone through, but even securing a free trade agreement with the European Union would require a process to be followed and would not happen overnight.

Mr Chope: The Minister says that we would need a free trade agreement, but does he accept that when we leave the European Union, the default position will be the World Trade Organisation rules that ensure free trade?

Mr Ellwood: Let me come on to free trade, because those issues were raised in the debate and perhaps I can answer my hon. Friend’s point. The European Union is our main trading partner and, as has been said, that trade is worth more than £500 million a year. That is half our total trade in goods and services. However, we can still trade with the rest of the world as well, and the EU has free trade agreements with more than 50 countries—that is alongside the 28 countries in the single market. Around 45% of Britain’s exports are designed for the single market itself, while 56% go to the single market and to countries the EU has free trade deals with. [ Interruption. ] I will give way to somebody if they would like to give me a break so that I can clear my throat.

Oliver Colvile: Could not failing to go through the right procedures end up delaying our exit from the EU because the issue would need to go the various courts? It is a bit like when a planning application goes wrong and someone is not happy with the process.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for that intervention—from a number of angles—and my hon. Friend makes an important point.

We have dealt with the delays, so I will move on to TTIP’s impact on the health service, which hon. Members raised. Many hon. Members have received emails on this subject questioning what the situation is. I should make it clear that TTIP poses no threat to the NHS
Mr Ellwood: The Prime Minister returned from the European Council having managed to secure the changes necessary for him and the Government to confirm the position that a reformed European Union is in the interests of British membership. From that perspective, there is a collective responsibility to support it. The reason for the change is the unique situation of having the vote. It is absolutely the case that individual Ministers can dissent, but people cannot pick and mix—they cannot take out a slice and say, “I don’t agree with that”, because that would make a mockery of participation and involvement in the European Union.

I was going to wait until the part of my speech dealing in detail with the timetable before I answered the question on purdah, but because of the lack of time, I am pleased to confirm that it will begin 28 days before the vote. I hope that helps my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough.

Several hon. Members have discussed VAT on sanitary goods. In our view, EU member states should have the flexibility to apply a zero rate of VAT to sanitary products. The Financial Secretary to the Treasury has written to the European Commission and other member states setting out the Government’s view that EU member states should have full discretion over the rate of VAT they should apply. The Financial Secretary has been informed by the Commission that its action plan may put forward options to allow member states greater flexibility in the application of the reduced and zero rates of VAT. I am sure that he will make more statements on this in due course.

We have touched on the trade deficit, which is an important issue. The Office for National Statistics’ “Pink Book” with data for 2015 and 2014 confirms that UK total exports to the 28 nations of the EU were £229 billion, and UK imports from the 28 states were £291 billion. The UK’s trade deficit with the EU 28 was therefore £62 billion. However, it would be disingenuous to use that figure on its own because of the difference between goods and services, of which hon. Members will be aware. We are far stronger in the services aspect. With the reforms that are coming through, that is where the single market is likely to grow in future, and where we are likely to be in surplus rather than in deficit. It is very important to recognise the opportunities for Britain in remaining in the European Union as a result of that.

Passports have been mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley talked about what happens when an individual from the European Union enters our borders and has their passport swiped. There is a watch list system used by Home Office staff for the purposes of border and national security, and the detection and prevention of crime. During business as usual, 100% of passengers arriving in the UK have their identity documents scanned against the watchlist, so somebody on it will be identified and can be detained if need be. The Government’s strategic objective to enhance border security and mitigate against organised criminality and terrorism risks has led to a requirement to check arriving passengers against the Schengen information system at the border. This is another great example of “what if”? If we were to depart from the European Union, would we have to renegotiate ourselves back into the ability to use SIS II, as it is called?
Philip Davies: Will the Minister confirm that, contrary to the assertions made in yesterday’s debate, when somebody comes into the UK from the European Union their entire criminal record does not flash up before the Border Force, and we do not then cart them off to kick them out of the country on that basis? Will he confirm that that was a wholly false assertion?

Mr Ellwood: I was not privy to the exact point in the debate when that comment was made, but I will ask the relevant Home Office Minister to write to my hon. Friend to clarify exactly what does happen. I am now mildly curious to find out those details myself.

Pat Glass: That is really interesting and I wonder whether that happens. It sounds like a damned good idea, doesn’t it?

Mr Ellwood: I feel an element of consensus breaking out in the Chamber, which is a rare thing.

As I bring my introductory remarks to a close, may I commend to you my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch on promoting the Bill, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough, who has been an astute advocate of debating these matters in more detail? The issue of Europe is not only topical, but of the utmost importance. It received a full day’s parliamentary debate yesterday and we will have further debates leading up to 23 June.

The British public made it clear that they were not happy with the status quo, and the Prime Minister sought to address that, so last November he wrote to Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, setting out in detail the four areas in which he sought change to the European Union, namely economic governance, competence, sovereignty and immigration. At the February European Council he achieved a deal covering each of those areas.

As the Prime Minister has said, we said that we would protect Britain as the eurozone continues to integrate. We have delivered that in this deal as well, with commitments to cut red tape, in particular for small businesses. That means we can create more jobs and security for working people in Britain.

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Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. My apologies for the fact that this debate means that you, the Minister and I will have to spend the last half hour of this parliamentary week together.

I want to talk briefly about some of the planning issues that are impacting on a particular part of my constituency, Haughton Green. For the benefit of the Minister, I will explain that Haughton Green is an urban village. Had he visited the place 60 years ago, he would have found open countryside separating Denton and Haughton Green. That has gradually been filled up, mainly by the creation of a Manchester City Council overspill estate in the late 1950s and 1960s, to the point where there is very little open space separating Denton and Haughton Green, although Haughton Green still classes itself as a village and is proud of its historical identity as a village.

The plan-led system has, in part, protected places such as Haughton Green, but Haughton Green now feels under siege. I first became involved in planning issues in the mid-1990s, when I was successfully elected as a member of Tameside Council representing the Denton West ward. Back then, there was a controversial proposal to build a business park on some open space between Denton and Gorton called Kingswater Park. It was so controversial that the application was called in by two Secretaries of State: the noble Lord Heseltine in 1990 and the noble Lord Prescott in 1998. Ultimately, the planning application never saw the light of day, thankfully.

Let me set the scene in respect of how the people of Haughton Green feel badly let down by the planning system. That started in 2008 with the application for the demolition of the old rectory. The Minister probably will not appreciate that the old rectory is part of a collection of significant Victorian architecture across Denton. It was part of a collection of quirky and unique buildings designed by James Medland and Henry Taylor, who were two of the most important architects at work in the Manchester area during that period. We are very fortunate to have a number of Medland and Taylor buildings in Denton. They were responsible for the grade I listed church of St Anne in Haughton, the grade II* listed rectory of St Anne in Haughton, the grade II* listed extension to St Lawrence's church in Denton and the grade II listed St Mary the Virgin church in Haughton Green.

Sadly, the old rectory of St Mary the Virgin church in Haughton Green never made it on to the register of listed buildings. English Heritage initially decided not to recommend the building for listing, but—as a result of representations by the Denton Local History Society and local residents, led by my friend Margaret Smethurst, and the Manchester Victorian Society—the Department for Culture, Media and Sport asked English Heritage to look again at its recommendation. Sadly, English Heritage refused to reconsider the building for listing, citing the many changes that had been made to the internal and external structure over the years. However, I believe that
enough original features were left to warrant listing the building in its own right, and certainly to do so as part of the collection of Medland and Taylor buildings in and around Denton.

The application for the redevelopment of the old rectory site was passed by Tameside Council, and the application to demolish the old rectory was approved on 30 June 2009. We now have the blight of a derelict site in Meadow Lane, the most beautiful of locations in Haughton Green, because the site has never been brought forward for redevelopment. As a result, we have a lost some pretty significant local architecture.

Local residents, not wanting to lose any more of the unique heritage of the Meadow Lane area, the historic core of the old village of Haughton Green, applied for the grant of conservation area status. The Minister will not know that everybody who goes down Meadow Lane appreciates its beauty and historical character, particularly in the urban area of Denton. Tameside Council was very sympathetic to its becoming a conservation area, but at the time it had what I can only describe as a pretty useless conservation officer. Unless a property was a Cotswolds, chocolate box cottage that had not been in any way altered throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, let alone the 21st century, she came up with every reason why it could not be protected or listed. She pretty much blocked the Meadow Lane area becoming a conservation area.

All has not been lost, however, because Tameside Council found a way around that. It is in the process of consulting local residents about designating the area under a supplementary planning document. I hope that that will offer some residents a say in how the Meadow Lane area, the historic core of Haughton Green, is permitted to develop in future, not least because we still have the blight or eyesore of a big gaping hole where the old rectory once stood. I will work with local residents to make sure that Tameside Council gets that SPD right for the people who live in Haughton Green.

That brings me to the devolution agenda. As the Minister will know, I have raised this several times because I have real concerns about how the Greater Manchester Combined Authority has gone about the initial, so-called public, consultation for its spatial framework. I and my constituents feel that we have been locked out of the process. The GMCA had a call for proposals by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority as being suitable for future housing development. These differ in sizes from one extreme, the school playing fields of the former Two Trees secondary school, which have been identified as being suitable for 237 new homes, right the way down to small sites such as a patch of land on Keats Avenue, which has been identified as being suitable for six new homes. In total, in Haughton Green alone, these sites would amount to 423 new homes. I say to the Minister that that is fine, but we need the infrastructure to be able to cope with that. We need to ensure that Haughton Green can cope with the additional new properties.

I urge the Minister to familiarise himself with the “Manchester A-Z”. He will see that Haughton Green is in a cul-de-sac. It is at the end of two country lanes that are now urban roads: Two Trees Lane and Mill Lane. They are the only ways in and out of the entirety of Haughton Green, including the massive Manchester overspill estate that was built in the 1960s. Already, those two lanes are log-jammed at peak times. I urge him to think very carefully about how we pay for the infrastructure if we are going to use all these infill development sites. None of the developers for those individual sites is going to say that they will pay for a new access route into Haughton Green, with the massive capital cost that that would incur. It is reasonableness by degrees, but if we put all the developments together, it is fairly certain that the existing road infrastructure into and out of Haughton Green will not be able to cope. It is struggling as it is. If we are going to use these sites—and I have issues with a number of the sites proposed by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority—we need to think about how we do so without generating traffic chaos.

The Haughton Green Methodist chapel is a very early example of a Methodist chapel. It opened in 1810 and is the oldest place of worship in the village. In 1791—I do not know if things have changed that much—the authorities agreed that the district of Denton and Haughton was one of the most uncivilised parts of England. A Wesleyan society was established and the church remained in use from 1810 to 2010. It then moved across the road to the newly refurbished Sunday school building, and this is where the Methodist church still meets to this day.

The Haughton Green Methodist chapel was bought by a speculative developer who did nothing with the old historic building, much to the frustration of local residents, and it quickly fell into dereliction and the churchyard became overgrown. It was put up for auction last year and bought by new owners. As the Minister and other Members will appreciate, when a building goes up for auction, the rumour mill starts as people wonder what is happening, and some of those rumours led to local concern.

For that reason, a month or so ago, I, together with councillors Claire Reid and Mike Fowler, and George Newton, a local community activist, met the new owners...
in my constituency office. They confirmed that some of the rumours were correct and that they intended to convert the building to a community centre and a new place of worship. As the Minister will appreciate, that is acceptable for a class D1 property—it was a place of worship and will still be a place of worship—and so no planning permission is required.

I want to drill down into the community centre side of the issue. Nearby, we have the Haughton Green centre, the Oasis centre, the Green Park centre, Haughton Green Methodist church, St Mary’s church and St John Fisher Catholic church, all of which have community rooms, buildings and facilities. There is no need for another community centre in Haughton Green, unless it is for a community that does not currently reside in Haughton Green, and that is where there are concerns. It has been confirmed that the Methodist church is to become an Islamic community centre and place of worship.

I have no interest in extending some of the views expressed by some of my constituents, but there is a large degree of concern, because it potentially means lots of people coming to Haughton Green to use a community building that is not for the community of Haughton Green. I will briefly detail the ward profile: Denton South has a population of 11,230; 98.2% is white; 77.7% is Christian; and 0.5% is Muslim. As sure as anything, the people using the community centre and place of worship will be coming from outside.

The church is on Two Trees Lane—one of the two lanes I told the Minister were already gridlocked. If the Methodists were coming to Haughton Green, in the year 2016, they would almost certainly not get planning permission for a Methodist church on Two Trees Lane without parking facilities. There is obvious frustration and concern among local residents about traffic, but local councillors are working to see whether traffic regulation orders can be put in place. There is also a concern about the graves. The council will almost certainly not permit the new owners to remove the graves from the churchyard. Furthermore, the new owners have put in a new mezzanine floor, suggesting it will be used by an awful lot of people. I have contacted the county fire officer to see whether fire safety regulations can invoke the need for a planning application.

I have raised those three issues, because, put together, they have left the people of Haughton Green feeling locked out of decisions about how their village is developing. Given the relaxation of planning rules and regulations, I fear this will become a growing problem across every constituency. Unless residents can buy into the planning system, unless their voice counts and unless their vision for their community matters, I fear that the disconnect between politicians and the public will just widen. That is why I urge the Minister to listen to the concerns of the people of Haughton Green. I will do my bit to ensure that their views, their voice and their concerns are raised at every appropriate level from local government right up to the Minister. If we believe in localism, we need to make sure that local people have a say in how their towns and villages develop in the future.

2.50 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): I congratulate the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) on securing the debate. I want to pay tribute to his clear and energetic campaigning on behalf of his residents. As we have seen here today, he is fully committed not just to urban regeneration but to ensuring that the environment, landscape and community for his residents—something we all want to see right across the country. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that for reasons of propriety, as the Minister for Housing and Planning, I cannot comment on particular planning proposals or draft local plan documents. I am nevertheless happy to respond in general terms to the issues that the hon. Gentleman has aired today. I hope to suggest some possible ways forward for his constituents.

Having listened to what the hon. Gentleman has said, it seems to me that his concerns relate more to policy, both local and national, than to rules. This Government’s expectations of the planning system are set out in the national planning policy framework. It is an important document and one of its important objectives is to promote the highest standards of architecture and design as well to ensure that the historical environment is allowed to play its part in place-making.

This is not just a matter of ensuring that conservation areas and buildings listed for their architectural and historical interest are safe. The character and distinctiveness of our villages, towns and cities are often dependent on townscape features that are not designated as heritage assets, as the hon. Gentleman outlined very well. Buildings, for instance, have clearly accrued over time and tell us about our history; they have varied texture and human-scale design; and they avoid the “sameness” that in reality spoilt too many of the town centres and developments that we have seen over the last few years.

Local authorities, of course, must ensure that appropriate roads and other hard infrastructure are there to support the developments they approve, but green infrastructure matters, as well. Trees and open spaces, whether or not protected by designation, play a vital role in place-making and promote public health. New infill development that shows care and respect to a town or village’s character and context can not only raise the spirits, but help to attract visitors and businesses and increase property values. The framework also makes it clear that local authorities should prioritise suitable brownfield land wherever practicable.

Whatever the development planned, it is best to make sure that the community is involved early on and is clear about its ability to get involved. Local residents have three main opportunities to have their say about future development: plan-making, neighbourhood planning and directly through planning applications. I shall touch on those in turn in the next few minutes.

Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council is in the early stages of scoping a supplementary planning document for the area. The council has already engaged planning and design consultants to lead early community engagement. I think that is a good thing, but we need to make sure that that engagement goes forward. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will urge his constituents to contribute their views through the plan-making process.

One of this Government’s ambitions in determinations for localism is to make sure that local people feel empowered and if possible take the lead on the approach to designs adopted in their area. If there is concern that buildings have not been listed for their architectural or historical interest, and that they are vulnerable, a community
Brandon Lewis: can use its local plan to create a local list of heritage buildings so that their merit is not ignored. Local people can also investigate a new design toolkit, which has been launched by the Prince’s Foundation and is entitled “Beauty-In-My-Back-Yard”. I commend it as something for the hon. Gentleman and his constituents to have a look at as providing a possible basis for dialogue with Tameside council and developers.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly outlined, there is the wider context of the Greater Manchester spatial framework. The 10 authorities of Greater Manchester have a long and successful history of working together to drive economic growth. The devolution deal provides further opportunities for that. At the local level, each individual authority will have to sign up and be accountable in the local area. Each authority must consult and involve the local area so that local people will have a say over development in their areas. I encourage all the hon. Gentleman’s constituents in Haughton Green to take part in the consultation, and I hope that they will consider engaging in neighbourhood planning as well, because that would be a massive step forward.

Andrew Gwynne: I agree with everything that the Minister has said so far, but local people need to know that a consultation is taking place. That is the problem that we had with the call for sites.

Brandon Lewis: That is a good point. It is important for local authorities to work hard to engage their local communities. However, neighbourhood planning allows people to have a direct say in the development of their areas. Not only can they work on the design of the plan, but every resident in the neighbourhood has a vote in a referendum. I am pleased that, so far, 88% of people have voted “yes” in neighbourhood planning referendums. If people are interested and involved, they will have confidence in the process and get behind it.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned parks and similar areas. We feel that people should be encouraged and empowered to have a say in what happens to assets of that kind. The community right to bid allows pieces of land, and buildings such as churches, to be listed as assets of community value when that is appropriate. I should be happy to give the hon. Gentleman further details of the listing process, which is extremely straightforward and simple, and can prove very successful in protecting assets. It is necessary to ensure that the right assets are protected, and the community is best placed to do that. We need a localised, flexible and reformed planning system that is driven by communities, and enables them to make decisions that are right for their areas. The people who know best are the people who live in those areas, and that is what neighbourhood planning, and assets of community value, are all about.

The people of Haughton Green, like those elsewhere, have statutory opportunities to comment and criticise when a local plan is revised, when a spatial plan is developed, and every time a planning application is made. Even if land is allocated for development in the spatial framework or local plan, a particular planning application can still be refused permission in response to evidence and well-argued objections. That brings me back to something that the hon. Gentleman has heard me say at the Dispatch Box a few times before. We want more homes to be built, but we also want them to be the right homes, in the appropriate places and for all tenures.

There are many opportunities for local people to have their hopes and concerns reflected in our modern, reformed planning system, especially if they have volunteered to work on a neighbourhood plan that is brought to a successful conclusion and adopted following a local referendum, and there are many ways in which to secure well-loved and useful local buildings and protect them from unnecessary loss. I hope that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents will take those opportunities on board, have confidence in their ability to use them, and enjoy success in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

2.58 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 29 February 2016

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill, as amended, be now considered.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be considered on Monday 7 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Campaign against Daesh

1. Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on progress in the campaign against Daesh.

[903755]

7. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on progress in the campaign against Daesh.

[903761]

11. Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on progress in the campaign against Daesh.

[903765]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): On 20 January, I attended the first Defence Ministers meeting in Paris, where we reviewed and agreed options for intensifying the military operation against Daesh in Iraq and Syria. On 11 February, I attended the full counter-Daesh ministerial in Brussels, where we agreed an accelerated campaign plan, including agreeing on the importance of the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa, and pressing Daesh from all sides.

Rehman Chishti: The international community had previously asked Arab countries to do more in the fight against Daesh. Having just returned from leading a parliamentary delegation to Saudi Arabia, I understand that the Saudi authorities are prepared to send ground troops into Syria to defeat Daesh but require air cover from their international partners. Will the United Kingdom and other international partners look at that request?

Michael Fallon: I welcome the contribution that co-operating Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, which was present at the Daesh meeting in Brussels, are making to the fight against Daesh, and I welcome the Saudi redeployment of F-15 aircraft to the coalition air campaign. I have seen the reports my hon. Friend mentioned that Saudi Arabia is prepared to send troops to the fight in Syria. We will wait to see the details of any plan before commenting on what support the UK would provide as part of the global coalition.

Kevin Hollinrake: Russian airstrikes are clearly targeting civilian populations in Syria, killing and maiming innocent men, women and children, as well as degrading the moderate Syrian forces that we are relying on to defeat Daesh in the region. Will the Secretary of State outline what actions we are taking now, and might take, to protect these populations and underpin our military strategy in the region?

Michael Fallon: I know that my hon. Friend will welcome the cessation of hostilities at the weekend. That appears largely to be holding for now, but it will succeed only if there is a major change of behaviour by the Syrian regime and by its principal backer, Russia. Russia must honour the agreement by ending attacks on Syrian civilians and moderate opposition groups and using its influence to ensure that the Syrian regime does the same. As for the second part of my hon. Friend’s question, there has been some progress in the past few weeks in reaching besieged areas. Some 60,000 people have recently been reached with aid through the United Nations food convoys.

Byron Davies: Continuing on the theme of the Russian bombing, what are my right hon. Friend and the Government doing to highlight Russia’s indiscriminate behaviour, and what contact has he had with the Russian authorities to end this outrage?

Michael Fallon: My right hon. Friend and I have been very clear and public that Russian actions have been undermining the prospects for ending the conflict in Syria. We welcome the Russian contribution to the most recent agreement that came into effect on Saturday. Russia can and should play a positive role in the fight against Daesh and in ending the conflict in Syria. I have to tell the House, however, that over 70% of Russian airstrikes have not been against Daesh at all but against civilians and moderate opposition groups in Syria—an appalling contribution to a conflict that must be ended.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): What discussions has the Secretary of State or other members of the Government had with our allies inside and outside the middle east about extending military action, including airstrikes, to Libya?

Michael Fallon: There have not been discussions about extending airstrikes to Libya because at the moment there is no Government in Libya. We have been working to assist the formation of a new Government in Libya, and it is then for that Government to make clear what assistance they require. We are party to the Libyan international assistance mission, and we will see exactly what kind of support the new Government want—whether it is assistance with advice or training, or any other kind of support.1

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Last week in Iraq, members of the Defence Committee were informed of the full horror of Daesh, specifically in Ramadi. As it is forced out of territory, it leaves behind minefields

of improvised explosive devices, including in people's fridges and toilets, but there are no resources available to remove them. What conversations is the Defence Secretary having with partners to ensure that those resources are made available?

Michael Fallon: The hon. Lady is right to say that Daesh has been seeing with improvised explosive devices those towns and villages from which it has been expelled. The British contribution to the training effort of the Iraqi forces has focused on counter-IED training, which we are now supplying at all four of the building partner capacity centres. If there is more we can do to assist the Iraqi and Kurdish forces in that training, we will certainly do so.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheik (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What support will the UK Government give to the United Nations, which is today giving fresh aid to Syria, and to the albeit very fragile ceasefire?

Michael Fallon: We have been making our contribution through the United Nations and we are ready to help do more. It is not easy for convoys to get through to some of the very hard-to-reach areas. Last week's aid drop was not entirely successful; it was dropped from a great height into a high wind, and a number of the pallets did not reach their target. The best way of getting aid in is by land convoys, but that is not easy in some of the particularly hard-to-reach areas.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Members of the Defence Committee also visited Jordan and Lebanon, and we were particularly concerned to see that Daesh was threatening the borders of relatively stable countries that Britain has assisted with huge and impressive investment. What more can my right hon. Friend and the Government do to support those countries in dealing with the clear and present danger of this evil organisation?

Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend is right to say that Daesh represents a threat to the stability of the entire region, including the neighbours of Iraq and Syria. We have already made a huge contribution towards training the Jordanian forces, and we have more to do. We have recently been playing a role in Lebanon, too, in helping its border defences.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State believe that the use of the much-vaunted Brimstone missile against Daesh has, as both he and the Prime Minister assured us it would, “cut off the head of the snake” in Raqqa?

Michael Fallon: Brimstone is one of the precision munitions available to our armed forces, alongside Paveway bombs and the Hellfire missile. The United Kingdom forces have flown more than 2,100 combat missions against Daesh and have carried out more than 600 strikes, including with Brimstone missiles. One of the points for review at the recent ministerial meeting was what more we can do to target the infrastructure that supports Daesh—its command and control, logistics and supply routes—as well as our efforts in support of Iraqi forces.

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but will he comment on recent reports in The New York Times that say that, although Daesh numbers have fallen in both Iraq and Syria, those in Libya have doubled in the same period? Is it not the case that, rather than diminishing Daesh, the current bombing campaign is simply displacing it?

Michael Fallon: No, I do not think there is direct evidence of movement from one country to another. Daesh is on the back foot in Iraq. The Iraqi and Kurdish forces, with support from the coalition, have liberated Tikrit, Baiji, Ramadi and other cities, and Daesh is being pushed back there. That is not happening yet in Syria, and I, like the hon. Gentleman, am extremely concerned about the proliferation of Daesh along the Libyan coastline, which is why we have been urgently assisting the formation of a new Libyan Government.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): As the Secretary of State has said, coalition efforts have a significant effect on stopping and degrading Daesh not only in Iraq, but, to a lesser degree, in Syria. Does he agree, however, that a conventional, full-frontal assault on Mosul and Raqqa might well have the opposite effect to that we are seeking, and that trying to do something about Daesh’s poisonous ideology and funding is possibly more important than purely conventional attacks?

Michael Fallon: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have to look at all those things and deal with Daesh across the board. We have to combat its ideology, we have to cut off its financing and we have to deal with the message that it is putting out to local populations. Preparations for the liberation of both Mosul and Raqqa will require very careful preparation to reassure the Sunni population, particularly of Mosul, that it will be able to enjoy better security once Daesh is thrown out.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): As we consider these issues, our thoughts are very much with the brave members of our armed forces who are serving in the middle east, with all those who are living under the brutality of Daesh and with the victims of the terror attacks that have been carried out all over the world. The Secretary of State is absolutely right to say that we can simultaneously welcome the progress towards a ceasefire and the contributions that the Russians have made, and condemn the previous Russian attacks on the moderate forces that the coalition is working with. Will he tell us how reliable he feels the estimate of 70,000 moderate Syrian ground forces is at this moment in time?

Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful for the official support that has been given to the campaign against Daesh. The 70,000 figure was not the Government’s figure; it was a figure produced independently by the Joint Intelligence Committee. We have no reason to believe that it is wrong. Indeed, the civil war in Syria has been raging for six years, so considerable forces, of which the 70,000 are a formidable part, have been engaged against the Syrian regime.

Toby Perkins: Just two days ago, ISIS launched a series of attacks on the headquarters of the Kurdish forces in Tal Abyad, to the north of Raqqa. Given that we were hoping that the moderate forces were waiting to take the fight to Daesh, that is obviously very concerning.
Will the Secretary of State tell us a little more about how effective he thinks UK airstrikes have been in achieving our objectives of weakening Daesh and supporting moderate forces to take back control and liberate Raqqah?

Michael Fallon: The UK is playing probably the second most important part in coalition air activity in the strikes, in surveillance and in intelligence. As I have said to the House, Daesh is being pushed back in Iraq. There is no doubt about that. It is being pushed up the Tigris and it is being pushed back west along the Euphrates. In Syria, the position is much more complicated. We are concerned at some of the more recent reports that may suggest co-ordination between Syrian democratic forces and the Assad regime, which is not helpful to the long-term aim of defeating Daesh.

Procurement

2. Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support British jobs and industry through its procurement process.

Mr Philip Dunne (Minister for Defence Procurement): In the strategic defence and security review published last November, the Ministry of Defence agreed a new strategic objective of contributing to the nation’s prosperity. We do that in many ways, not least through our procurement process. About half of which is in the manufacturing sector. The British defence and security industry is the largest in Europe, and it plays a vital role in delivering battle-winning capabilities for our armed forces. As a Department, we are driving greater innovation into defence procurement, maximising opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses, investing in skills and contributing to a more prosperous economy.

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend speaks magnificently not only for his constituents, but for the largest UK defence contractor, whose main centre of engineering innovation is in his constituency. I congratulate him on that and applaud him for it.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Given that Ministry of Defence procurement operates under European law, what assessment has the Minister made of a potential exit from the European Union on UK SMEs that rely on MOD contracts?

Mr Dunne: As my hon. Friend knows, the UK defence and security industry is the largest in Europe. As the default position, we continue to place contracts on the basis of open competition. EU procurement directives apply to our procurement, which means that EU contractors are eligible to compete for our contracts in the same way as UK and other international companies, other than when we declare an article 346 exemption for warlike stores, which accounts for about 45% of our procurement.1

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): On procurement, I hope that the remarks about Europe made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) also apply in relation to our overseas territories. During the last recess, I had the chance to visit our servicemen and women in the Falklands. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the 1,200 personnel there? Will he confirm that this Government will work closely with the Falkland Islands Government to improve the accommodation there and will procure such improvements through British providers?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend might have preferred to put that question to the Secretary of State, who has just visited the Falkland Islands. He is the first United Kingdom Defence Secretary to do so for over a decade. I can confirm to my hon. Friend that, as part of the SDSR conclusions, the Ministry of Defence has committed to investing £180 million in the Falkland Islands, including the improvements he seeks to the accommodation.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): There are more than 15,000 high-skill, high-value jobs in the defence sector in the north-west alone, with earnings that are more than 40% higher than the national average. We have heard previously about the lack of a proper industrial strategy for defence with respect to steel, so when will the Government look at the wider economic benefits when it comes to protecting those high-skill, high-value jobs and to creating new ones in the context of defence procurement?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman should have a word with the leader of his party. Government Members care about both security and prosperity, and the hon. Gentleman may like to remind his leader that grandstanding on a Saturday places at risk not only the ultimate security of the nation, but the tens of thousands of jobs and the hundreds of companies in the submarine industry in this country.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Perhaps the Minister should listen to the questions, stop throwing out allegations of grandstanding and take the issue of the steel industry in this country seriously. The chronic under-investment in steel in this country by this Government is nothing less than a national disgrace. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) said, 60% of the steel required for the Royal Navy’s offshore patrol vessels has been sourced from Sweden, to name but one example. Does the Minister not agree that the MOD should consider wider employment, industrial and economic factors in its procurement policy? Its policy is obviously not working given that, as he has said, such a low level, in truth, comes from British companies.

Mr Dunne: UK suppliers make a significant contribution to the supply of steel for our defence programmes, including some 94% of the steel in the aircraft carriers—77,000 tonnes—being sourced from UK mills. The Government and I recognise that there is an issue that is affecting steel production in this country. That is why we established the steel procurement working group, on which the Ministry of Defence is represented. I instructed the Department and wrote to our major defence prime contractors last December to ensure that the guidance on steel procurement was implemented across defence. That will enable proactive engagement with the UK steel market on procurement pipelines through the supply chain and ensure that cost calculations can be taken into account over the whole life, and not just at the initial price.

Mr Speaker: The exchanges today are, to put it mildly, a tad long-winded. There are a lot of questions to get through. What is required is a pithy question and a pithy answer. It is not very difficult.

Civilian Workforce

3. Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned 30% reduction in his Department’s civilian workforce on front-line service personnel.

10. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the planned 30% reduction in his Department’s civilian workforce on front-line service personnel.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): Our civilian workers do an excellent job. I recognise that reductions in our workforce will require the Ministry of Defence to look strategically at the way in which we operate. The majority of the planned reductions are under way and there is an opportunity to identify further efficiencies across defence. Our priority is to deliver a smaller, more productive workforce that will ultimately generate savings for reinvestment in front-line capability.

Jess Phillips: Does the Minister acknowledge that further cuts to the civilian workforce will inevitably shift the burden on to armed forces personnel? How does he think that will affect the retention, recruitment and morale of our troops, which, according to servicemen and women in my constituency, are already worryingly low?

Mark Lancaster: No, I do not, because the savings of approximately £300 million that we will be able to make will ultimately be reinvested in front-line capability.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Does the Minister think that expertise may be lost as a result of the cuts to the civilian force?

Mark Lancaster: Under the “whole force” approach, we have tried to find the balance both between regular and reserve service personnel, and between MOD civilians and contractors. This is a mix that successive Governments have followed. We try to use the right people in the right place at the right time.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Civilians at Defence Equipment and Support fulfil one of the MOD’s most important responsibilities—making sure that our troops have the right kit; yet they, along with the rest of the MOD’s civilians staff, face 30% cuts. DE&S requires highly specialist expertise, for example, to make sure that our aircraft are safe, so will the Minister explain how he can impose 30% cuts without losing such vital skills?

Mark Lancaster: I am afraid that the hon. Lady may be misinformed. DE&S does not face 30% cuts. We are not imposing a blanket 30% cut across the whole of defence. If anything, she is slightly scaremongering and should perhaps reflect on her comments.

Emily Thornberry: The Minister is telling us that although there will be 30% cuts across the civilian staff, some areas will face cuts to civilian staff higher than 30% and other areas will face 20% cuts. It is in the strategic defence review that there will be 30% cuts to civilian staff, but he tells me that they will not be at DE&S, so where will they be instead? In the last two years alone, DE&S has lost 5,000 staff. At the same time, the cost of contractors has spiralled. We are in the ludicrous position where the Public Accounts Committee says that we are spending £250 million on contractors who are advising us on how to reduce our reliance on contractors. Surely the Minister ought to learn from experience and make these cuts in a strategic way, as opposed to introducing arbitrary cuts.
Mark Lancaster: I am grateful for the pithy question. There is a basic misunderstanding here. The hon. Lady needs to understand that many of these programmes are already in place. For example, the footprint strategy, which will see our footprint reduced by some 30%, will naturally mean that there is less need for civilians in certain parts of the estate. Some of the measures are already under way, so we do not simply have to impose a blanket 30% cut in DE&S.

EU Membership: National Security

4. Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of EU membership on the UK’s national security.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): NATO is the cornerstone of the United Kingdom’s defence. The European Union plays an important complementary role in supporting NATO’s response to international crises, by applying economic, humanitarian and diplomatic levers that NATO does not have. The Government therefore believe that the United Kingdom’s continued membership of a reformed European Union will make us safer and stronger.

Drew Hendry: Cyber threats pose a significant risk to the defence of the UK, and that issue was identified as one of four security challenges in the 2015 defence review. The EU network information and security directive was created in 2014 to enhance data security throughout EU member states, and it is vital that cyber security continues to be a priority for the MOD. Does the Minister agree that remaining a member of the European Union greatly enhances our ability to respond to future cyber threats?

Michael Fallon: Our recent strategic defence and security review identified cyber as one of the key threats facing this country. My Department has now taken overall responsibility for cyber security, and we are spending more than £2 billion to ensure that we keep the institutions of government properly protected and do our best to spread good practice in our industry.

17. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On a scale of one to 10, and in terms of preserving our national security, how would the Secretary of State rate the membership of NATO with our membership of the EU?

Michael Fallon: As I have said, NATO is the cornerstone of our defence and the EU plays a complementary role. I have not yet come across any NATO Defence Minister who thinks that we should leave the European Union or that we would be safer and stronger outside it. Taken together, membership of those two organisations—the alliance and the union—keeps us stronger and safer in an uncertain world.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State think that President Putin would shed a tear if the UK left the European Union? Is it not clear that we are better off being part of that collaboration and sitting round the table with France, Germany and Italy, and thinking about all those security issues? Are we not better off and safer remaining part of the European Union?

Michael Fallon: The European Union was able to impose sanctions on President Putin for what he did in annexing Crimea and his aggression in eastern Ukraine. I think that President Putin would certainly welcome any fracturing of either NATO or the European Union.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend accept that by advancing the rather quaint idea that somehow our membership of the EU enhances our national security, he is merely playing into the hands of people such as Mr Juncker and Chancellor Merkel who, if Britain votes to remain in the EU, would advance towards a European army and permanent structured co-operation, the result of which would be to undermine NATO—the very organisation that the Secretary of State says is the cornerstone of our national defence?

Michael Fallon: We have made it absolutely clear that we would not support any move towards a European Union army of the kind that my hon. Friend suggests. These two organisations have different memberships and slightly different objectives. As I have said, NATO is the key part and cornerstone of our defence, but legal, economic, diplomatic and humanitarian levers are available to the European Union that NATO does not have. Being a member of both gives us the best of both worlds.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): When the Secretary of State talks to fellow European Defence Ministers, he must acknowledge that some would prefer a European defence force ultimately to replace NATO. What is his view on that, and will he acknowledge that most of our European security successes are bilateral and not as part of the EU?

Michael Fallon: I have not heard a fellow European Defence Minister call on us to help to create any kind of European defence force. At the last NATO meeting I attended in Brussels last month, it was interesting that Germany specifically asked for NATO to help police the Aegean sea and deal with the migrant pressure. There is a role for NATO in some of these operations, and a role in other areas for the European Union. We are fortunate in being members of both.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is essential that all members of our armed forces serving away from home are able to vote in the June referendum?

Michael Fallon: Yes. The arrangements for voting in the referendum, as I understand it, are exactly the same as in a general election. Following my hon. Friend’s reminder, we will of course make every effort to ensure as high a turnout by the armed forces as possible.

Mesothelioma

5. Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): What plans he has to reform compensation for armed forces veterans affected by mesothelioma.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): When I announced to the House on 16 December that veterans diagnosed on or after that date with diffuse mesothelioma as a result of their service would have the option of receiving a lump sum of £140,000, I also committed to looking at whether it could be extended to veterans diagnosed before that date. We have kept our word and I am delighted to confirm that the option of a lump sum payment will be extended to veterans in receipt of a war pension for mesothelioma diagnosed before 16 December 2015.

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is thoroughly good news. Following the campaigns of many in this House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) and my friend the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), this announcement will be very, very welcome. How will people affected be able to claim the money?

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s kind comments. I have instructed the Veterans Agency to contact all those we know of with immediate effect. I hope the payments will be made on or shortly after 11 April.1

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to Members, such as the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) and others, who have campaigned on this issue? I welcome the direction of travel. Will he also pay tribute to Rhod Palmer, a third generation Royal Navy sailor who has just recently been diagnosed and stands to benefit, who thought of the wider issue that more research needs to be done into this devastating disease?

Mark Lancaster: I recognise the actions of Members on both sides of the House who have campaigned to ensure that change comes forward. I am delighted to be able to stand here today to make this announcement. It is absolutely the right thing to do.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I have recently been contacted by my constituent, George, whose father sadly passed away from this rare cancer. He is concerned that research is not being properly funded. Does the Ministry of Defence currently fund such research and will the Minister commit to looking at funding levels for mesothelioma research?

Mark Lancaster: It is, rightly, a matter for the Department of Health, but I am more than happy to take it up with my colleagues in the Department to see what can be done.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I am delighted to welcome today’s announcement to the House, but I would just like to add a little word of caution. We must make sure that when people are given the option—specifically, widows who may survive by many years servicemen who die from this deadly disease—there are no unintended consequences. We must make sure that if widows choose the option of a lump sum, it will not have the impact of their losing benefits over the years.

Mark Lancaster: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman, who has been one of the campaigners ensuring that this change has come forward. He is absolutely right to make that point. I emphasise to the House that this is very much an option and I will ensure that when recipients are notified they are fully informed about what the options actually mean.

Dalgety Bay

8. Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): When he expects work to deal with radiation contamination at Dalgety Bay to be completed. [903762]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The Ministry of Defence has been actively undertaking site monitoring and removal since 2011. We are keen to move to the next stage of investigation when the other three parties involved agree to site access. Discussions around that have already taken place and it is anticipated that an agreement will be signed shortly. We will continue to work closely with all parties to ensure that the matter is resolved as quickly as possible.

Roger Mullin: After 26 years, this non-action is just not good enough. In recent weeks, Defence Infrastructure Organisation officials have cancelled meetings with landowners to discuss access arrangements, have failed to turn up to meetings with local elected officials, and are treating the local community with contempt. When I meet the Minister on Wednesday, I hope I can get a detailed timeline for when action will be taken.

Mark Lancaster: I do not entirely accept what the hon. Gentleman says. My understanding is that we have been making positive progress, and that action has been taken through monitoring and removal on the beach since 2011. I am absolutely clear what the MOD’s responsibilities are in this matter. I look forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman later this week. I hope we can have a constructive approach to moving this issue forward.

Type 31 General Purpose Frigate

9. Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Where he expects the Type 31 general purpose frigate to be built. [903763]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Julian Brazier): The new light general purpose frigate will be crucial to the longer-term future of the UK’s warship-building industry and will form a central part of the national shipbuilding strategy, which is due to be published later this year. No decision is expected to be made on the build location until the programme has further matured.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Given the expectations raised by the Government following the strategic defence and security review, that answer is most unwelcome. Does the Minister not agree with me—I may be biased as a Glasgow MP—that, given that the finest ships anywhere in the world were built on the Clyde, it would be the perfect location for this building to take place?

Mr Brazier: To date, £3.5 billion has been spent on the aircraft carrier programme in Scotland. In 2014, we placed a £348 million contract for three offshore patrol vessels, helping to sustain 800 Scottish jobs, and helping, too, to secure the skills for the eight Type 26 global

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combat ships planned to be constructed on the Clyde. The general purpose frigates may also be built on the Clyde, but it is too early to commit to a decision.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): In making decisions on the general purpose frigate, will the Minister keep in mind the need to avoid the difficulties that the Type 45s have had in their electrical and mechanical propulsion systems?

Mr Brazier: Yes; they are fine ships, but mistakes were made under the last Government.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): We have already heard today how the patrol vessels have been made with Swedish steel, and the Ministry has admitted to me that the Tide class tankers are being made in Korea with Korean steel but cannot tell me where the steel will come from for the Type 26, so what assurances will we have that British steel will be used in the manufacture of the Type 31?

Mr Brazier: My hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement has already given a comprehensive answer on the use of steel. There will be an opportunity to bid, as has always been the case, but we clearly cannot commit in advance. We do not even know for certain that British companies will bid. We cannot commit at this stage.

Ministry of Defence Police

12. Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): What plans he has to change the number of Ministry of Defence police officers.

Mrs Moon: What legal advice has the Minister sought or received in relation potentially to removing armed MOD police from civilian establishments and replacing them with armed forces personnel?

Mark Lancaster: We are looking at a number of options on how to make the best use of our MOD police and to move them away from simply static guarding towards taking a more proactive role in the communities and our service communities. A number of discussions have taken place, but these options are yet to be fully explored. I shall come back to the House in due course.

Mr Speaker: Ah, get in there—I call Michael Fabricant.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I shall indeed try to get in there. While I do not wish to detract in any way from the wonderful work done by MOD police, will the Minister take this opportunity to praise the work of the Royal Marines who police our nuclear facilities in Scotland?

Mark Lancaster: I am of course delighted to join my hon. Friend in praising the work of the Royal Marines up in Scotland. I have seen their work first hand in recent years.

Armed Forces: Legal Claims

13. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What support his Department provides to members of the armed forces who are subject to legal claims relating to their service.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): Where there are allegations of serious wrongdoing, they need to be investigated, but we are very aware of the stress this places on our service personnel and we must honour our duty of care to them. This will involve funding independent legal advice and pastoral support. We are also aware, however, that a great many allegations are being made on grounds of malice or by some law firms for profit. We will shortly bring forward measures to close down this shameless and shoddy racket.

Andrew Stephenson: The allegations that British soldiers murdered innocent Iraqis were found by the al-Sweady inquiry to be wholly false. Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that we should do all we can to reclaim costs from law firms that shamefully promoted these allegations and that anyone who received financial backing from them would be well advised either to return it or to make a donation to Help for Heroes?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. The defence in the case that he mentioned cost the British taxpayer £31 million, and the law firm involved, Leigh Day, has been referred to the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal. We are looking at ways in which we can recoup costs, in that case and in others. Those who have their own associations with Leigh Day will need to make their own judgments.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I ask the Minister to speak more clearly, over the heads of the current brave soldiers and other servicemen, to those who might wish to join the Army, the Air Force or the Navy? It is very worrying for young people to think that, in serving their country, they might end up being accused of dreadful crimes.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me an opportunity to send that clear message about a matter that obviously causes huge stress to individual service personnel. It corrupts their operations, and it undermines human rights by undermining international humanitarian law. I fully understand why someone who wanted to join the armed forces would be concerned about all three of those issues, and we shall be introducing a number of measures to address them.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister and, indeed, the Secretary of State have been very vocal about the importance of introducing a Bill to protect service personnel from spurious, costly and stressful legal actions. However, there have been apparently well-informed reports that the Bill is ready to proceed, but is being held up in Downing Street for fear that it might somehow impinge on the forthcoming European Union
referendum debates. Can the Minister confirm that her Department will do as much as possible to ensure that the Bill is introduced at the earliest opportunity, and is not delayed by spurious external political reasons?

Penny Mordaunt: I can give my right hon. Friend those reassurances. I think that, in all respects, the information on which he based his question is not correct. A number of measures will be introduced, some of which may be attached to pieces of legislation, and we hope to be able to make announcements before local government purdah kicks in.

Libya

14. Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Whether he plans to send armed ground forces to Libya. [903769]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): We do not envisage deploying ground forces to Libya in a combat role. The United Kingdom is considering, with our partners, how we can best support a new Libyan Government. Planning to date has focused on capacity building and security sector reform, but it is too early to say exactly what form that support would take. Before taking any military action in Libya, we would seek an invitation from the new Libyan Government.

Kirsten Oswald: I was disappointed to read in the media the Secretary of State’s recent statement that he had personally authorised the use of United Kingdom bases for United States airstrikes in Libya. The matter was not brought to the Chamber in advance. Furthermore, yesterday’s papers reported that the Government had now deployed British advisers to Libya. Will the Secretary of State commit himself to stopping this mission creep, and to ensuring that no further such action is taken without the leave of the House? Will he also explain his assessment of whether the action to date was lawful according to UK standards relating to the use of force, international humanitarian law, and human rights law?

Michael Fallon: The United States followed standard procedures, and made a formal request to use our bases. Once we had verified the legality of the operation, I granted permission for the United States to use our bases to support it, because they are trying to prevent Daesh from using Libya as a base from which to plan and carry out attacks that threaten the stability of Libya and the region, and indeed, potentially, the United Kingdom and our people as well. I was fully satisfied that the operation, which was a United States operation, would be conducted in accordance with international law.

Mr Speaker: With exemplary brevity—Tom Brake.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): In what level of military involvement do the Government believe the British military must engage in Libya before the Prime Minister will bring any decision regarding military intervention in that country to the House?

Michael Fallon: As I have said, we do not intend to deploy ground forces in any combat role. Before engaging in any military operation in Libya, we would of course have to seek an invitation from the Libyan Government, and would also have to involve this Parliament. As part of the international community, we have been party to the Libyan international assistance mission, and we are ready to provide advice and training in support of the new Libyan Government. A training team of some 20 troops from the 4th Infantry Brigade is now moving to Tunisia to help to counter illegal cross-border movement from Libya in support of the Tunisian authorities.

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) to go to bed a very sad and miserable boy, so I call him to ask the last question.

Reporting of Civilian Casualties

15. Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): If he will direct an official of his Department to meet representatives of Airwars to discuss the process for external organisations to submit reports of civilian casualties related to UK military activity. [903770]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): Airwars has been proactive in submitting written reports of civilian casualties and we are grateful for its efforts and for the value that they add. Each case has been individually reviewed and it has been demonstrated that the civilian casualties were not caused by UK activity. Our targeting processes are extremely robust in this respect and in others, but I would welcome any further ideas about how value may be added.

Mr Allen: I understand that the Department is now seeing people to discuss accurate civilian casualty numbers, and I will be most grateful if that is indeed the case. However, the report on compensation for the families of the innocent victims of our bombing has been with the Department for some five months. Can it now be surfaced?

Penny Mordaunt: I have committed to review any such reports of civilian casualties and I have oversight of the whole process, including compensation. I would be very happy to look at the report, but if the hon. Gentleman has any specific cases that he wishes to raise with me, he should please do so.

Topical Questions

T1. [903795] Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): Our priorities are our operations against Daesh, which I reviewed earlier this month with some 40 of my international counterparts, and delivering our defence review commitments to increase the size and power of our armed forces to keep this country safe.

Amanda Milling: In the light of Russian aggression, the threat of Daesh and growing cyber-attacks, can my right hon. Friend confirm that this Government are committed to spending 2% of GDP on defence in every year of this Parliament? Does not the failure of the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) to match this commitment show that Labour is a risk to our security?
Michael Fallon rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat, Secretary of State. I appreciate the earnestness and commitment of the hon. Lady, but questions must be about Government policy, for which Ministers are responsible—

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Labour haven’t got any.

Mr Speaker: Order. Be quiet, Mr Bridgen! Ministers are responsible for Government policy, not that of the Opposition. On the Government’s policy, the Secretary of State will comment; on that of the Opposition, he will not.

Michael Fallon: Let me confirm that this Government are committed to spending 2% of GDP on defence every year in this Parliament. The defence budget will rise by 0.5% above inflation every year of this decade and additional funding will be made available to the armed forces and intelligence agencies through the joint security fund. We have the largest defence budget in the European Union and the second largest in NATO, and this investment keeps us safe.

Mr Speaker: A model of the genre to be circulated without delay to all members of the Cabinet.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Alcohol misuse and dependency continue to create serious health risks, including those that can lead to loss of life, in the armed forces, where its use is three times higher than in the civilian population. It is now a year since the Defence Select Committee highlighted the fact that the Government’s alcohol strategy for the armed forces had made no noticeable difference. What steps is the Secretary of State now taking to set targets to manage alcohol consumption patterns and to address this serious issue?

Michael Fallon: The Army is taking steps to address this problem, particularly under the new Army leadership code. If I may, I will write to the hon. Lady with further details.

Mr Speaker: T5. [903799] Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that the last Government looked at all the alternatives to our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, and that none offered the protection that we need? Does he agree with the two former Labour Defence Secretaries who have said that it is “self-evident that a British nuclear deterrent will be essential to our security for decades to come”?

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Mr Philip Dunne): I can confirm to my hon. Friend that in 2013 the Trident alternatives review concluded that no alternative system was as stable, capable or cost-effective as the current Trident-based deterrent. There is no alternative. The part-time deterrents and half-baked measures currently being suggested by some Labour Members could be ruthlessly exploited by our adversaries and would present a real danger to the safety and security of the United Kingdom.

T2. [903796] Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): What role does the Secretary of State see the Russian bombing of targets and civilians in Syria playing in driving the refugee crisis to the shores of Europe?

Michael Fallon: Russia’s failure to halt airstrikes on the civilian population seemed designed to push that population towards the Turkish border and to make it Europe’s problem. That is why it is enormously important now that the ceasefire holds and that Russia returns to a more constructive path of working with us to get this terrible civil war ended.

T9. [903804] Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Given the rapid growth in the volume and sophistication of cyber-attacks, a number of which are thwarted by GCHQ in my constituency, what steps are being taken to ensure that our rising defence budget actually translates into enhanced sovereign capability in cyber?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Penny Mordaunt): I pay tribute to all my hon. Friend’s constituents who work to protect our country against cyber-attacks, which are indeed growing. We have increased spending in this area to £2.5 billion, and as 80% of cyber-attacks are preventable by some extremely simple, straightforward good practice, a lot of that investment will be going to protect British businesses and private individuals in that respect.

T3. [903797] Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The strategic defence and security review supposedly included £12 billion of additional expenditure on equipment, but with £16 billion extra allocated for nuclear submarines, massive cuts have been made elsewhere to support that. A written answer referred me to the defence equipment plan, but it has insufficient detail on the changes, so will the Minister commit to providing further clarity on the changes within the 2015 SDSR?

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for taking such an interest in the equipment plan, which is a bit of a specialist subject. We will be publishing the next annual iteration of the equipment plan, just as we have done for each of the past three years, and it will demonstrate that there will be an additional £12 billion committed to spending on military equipment over the next 10 years. That will take it up to £178 billion, but he will have to be a bit more patient before he sees how that is allocated.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): In December 2014, the Secretary of State told this House that the legal aid wrongly claimed by Leigh Day and co—because of inadequate disclosure—should be reimbursed. Is it still his view that it will be reimbursed in full? Given the timescales that have passed so far, when does he think the money will be received?

Penny Mordaunt: We are awaiting the Legal Aid Agency’s response to our request to revoke the legal aid award on the grounds that it would not have been made in the first place had the agency been made aware of all relevant documentation in that case. We are still waiting on that judgment, but we believe it is imminent.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): Not content with comparing himself to our country’s wartime leader—the greatest ever Briton and saviour of the free world—this weekend the Mayor of London compared his opposition to the EU to James Bond taking on a sinister supranational organisation. May I therefore ask the Secretary of State whether, in all his dealings with the intelligence and security services, and with the special forces, such a similarity has ever occurred to him?
Michael Fallon: I do not think it would be wise, and it certainly would not be proper, to discuss any conversations I have had with the intelligence and security communities.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Ministry of Defence has had to spend £100 million on legal claims? Will this Government make sure that we spend money on our troops, and on giving them the best support and equipment, rather than on filling the wallets of unscrupulous lawyers?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises a good point: the money we are having to spend on dealing with malicious allegations against our armed forces would be better spent on equipment and training for them. I can assure him that commercial legal spending in the Department is down a third on last year’s. I think he was making reference to the amount spent on Iraqi historic allegations, and we are doing what we can to ensure that this works more effectively and efficiently. I have had some good conversations with the Attorney General’s office about this and he will be visiting the team shortly.

T4. [903798] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Given the increasing double-counting of defence expenditure towards both the official development assistance and the NATO targets, through mechanisms such as the conflict, security and stability fund, what discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Chancellor about the redefinition of ODA at the OECD level?

Michael Fallon: It is for the OECD to classify overseas development aid spending, and it is for NATO to classify what is acceptable as defence spending, which it will do after each member state submits its return.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): Given the importance of our nuclear deterrent to our national security, will my right hon. Friend tell the House what representations he has had from the Labour party in support of this Government’s clear policy in this important area?

Michael Fallon: I have so far received some rather conflicting representations on the future of our nuclear deterrent. Like many Members across this House, there are mainstream Members of the Labour party who support—as every previous Government have done—the renewal of the nuclear deterrent that has helped to keep this country safe. There are some other Labour Members who seem to think that we can turn our nuclear submarines into water taxis.

T6. [903800] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Germany and Sweden have stopped selling weapons to Saudi Arabia as a result of concerns over Saudi actions in Yemen. Will the Government do likewise and impose a ban on arms sales to Saudi Arabia?

Mr Dunne: All our defence exports to the King of Saudi Arabia or to any other country go through the same rigorous export control system that we have in place. We are proud of that system as it is more rigorous than that of any other country, and that will continue to be the case while this Government are in post.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I recently visited the Royal Marines on Arctic warfare training in northern Norway with my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth). Will my hon. Friend join me in applauding 1 Assault Group Royal Marines and 45 Commando, which are known as some of the most elite commando forces in the world, and explain how the strategic defence and security review will support the Royal Marines?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend is very brave to have joined the Royal Marines in the Arctic. I pay tribute to her and her colleagues for doing so. The SDSR is committed to maintaining amphibious capability. We will be making modifications to one of the two Queen Elizabeth carriers to ensure that that persists for the life of that platform.

Penny Mordaunt: The tasks that we allocate our personnel are there for operational reasons. That is how we allocate not only the liability of each of our services, but the trades that sit within them.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): Along with many of my colleagues, I also went away during the recess. I had the pleasure of visiting the Falkland Islands. People there expressed concern about leaving the EU from an economic point of view, but will my right hon. Friend confirm, from a national security point of view, that a Conservative Government will always defend the right of the islanders to determine their own future, and reject calls from the Leader of the Opposition for a power-sharing deal?

Michael Fallon: As I said earlier, it was a pleasure to be the first Defence Secretary to visit the islands for more than a decade and to meet many of the 1,200 service personnel who are based there and to confirm our investment programme of £180 million over the next 10 years. Unlike the situation with the Labour party, nobody can be in any doubt about our commitment to the right of the islanders to determine their own future, and not to have it bargained away by a possible Labour Government reaching some accommodation with Argentina.

Mr Speaker: Alex Cunningham. Not here.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): My constituent, Chris Hartley, was wounded while serving with our armed forces in Sierra Leone in 2000 when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded next to him, resulting in the loss of his right leg above the knee. He is unable to get funding or NHS support for a life-changing operation that would allow him to work and to restore some of the pride that he had before his injury. Will the Minister convene a meeting with a colleague from the Department
of Health and me to explore what can be done to help my constituent who gave so much in the service to this country?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I would be delighted to do that.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Is it not the case that, if the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, France and Germany are more likely to dominate Europe’s defence structures, which means that, in the medium term, over the horizon, we are more likely to see European defence structures compete with, rather than complement, NATO?

Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend has made his views in this great debate very clear. As I said to the House earlier, NATO is the cornerstone of our security and the European Union complements that, with a number of other levers and weapons at its disposal—humanitarian, diplomatic and economic. There is no doubt in my mind that the fracturing of either the alliance or the Union would not aid the collective security of the west.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Have any embedded British pilots flown any missions at all into Libya?

Michael Fallon: No.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, I call Mr Philip Hollobone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Since the parliamentary vote on Syria at the beginning of December, there have been 319 RAF airstrikes against Daesh in Iraq and 43 RAF airstrikes against Daesh in Syria. As we are meant to be targeting the head of the snake, why have there been seven and a half times more airstrikes in Iraq?

Michael Fallon: There were more airstrikes in Iraq than in Syria in December and January because we were engaged in assisting the Iraqi forces in liberating Ramadi, which was where most of the military action was, and assisting the Kurdish forces in the liberation of Sinjar, further north. As I discussed with my fellow Ministers in Brussels, it is also important to continue to attack the infrastructure that supports Daesh, including the oil wellheads from which it derives its revenue, and some of our strikes have been on those oilfields in eastern Syria.
Child Refugees: Calais

3.36 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on child refugees in Calais.

The Minister for Immigration (James Brokenshire): Last Thursday, a judge in France ruled that the authorities in Calais could proceed with clearing the tents and makeshift accommodation from the southern section of the migrant camp located there. Over recent weeks the authorities, working with non-governmental organisations, have ensured that the migrants affected by the clearances, which have begun today, were aware of the alternative accommodation that the French state had made available. For women and children, that means the specialist accommodation for about 400 people in and around the Jules Ferry centre, or the protected accommodation elsewhere in the region. For others, this means the recently erected heated containers that can house 1,500 people.

The French Government have also, with the support of UK funding, established more than 100 welcome centres elsewhere in France where migrants in Calais can find a bed, meals and information about their options. To be clear, no individual needs to remain in the camps in Calais and Dunkirk. The decision to clear part of the camp in Calais is of course a matter for the French Government. The joint declaration signed in August last year committed the UK and France to a package of work to improve physical security at the ports, to co-ordinate the law enforcement response, to tackle the criminal gangs involved in people smuggling and to reduce the number of migrants in Calais.

Both Governments retain a strong focus on protecting those vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation, and have put in place a programme to identify and help potential victims in the camps around Calais. The UK is playing a leading role in tackling people smuggling, increasing joint intelligence work with the French to target the callous gangs that exploit human beings for their own gain.

The UK shares the French Government’s objective of increasing the number of individuals who take up the offer of safe and fully equipped accommodation away from Calais so that they can engage with the French immigration system, including by lodging an asylum claim. It is important to stress that anyone who does not want to live in the makeshift camps in Calais has the option of engaging with the French authorities, who will provide accommodation and support. That is particularly important for unaccompanied children. When an asylum claim is lodged by a child with close family connections in the UK, both Governments are committed to ensuring that such a case is prioritised, but it is vital that the child engages with the French authorities as quickly as possible. That is the best way to ensure that these vulnerable children receive the protection and support they need and the quickest way to reunite them with any close family members in the UK.

The UK is committed to safeguarding the welfare of unaccompanied children and we take our responsibilities seriously. No one should live in the conditions we have seen in the camps around Calais. The French Government have made huge efforts to provide suitable, alternative accommodation for all those who need it, and have made it clear that migrants in Calais in need of protection should claim asylum in France.

Yvette Cooper: This morning the French authorities started to move people out of the southern part of the Calais refugee camp, in theory into container shelters and reception centres elsewhere. The charities say that there is not enough alternative accommodation and around 2,300 people have nowhere to go. That includes many from Syria and Afghanistan, and over 400 children and teenagers with no one to look after them, such as the 12-year-old boy I met from Afghanistan with a huge scar across his face, which had happened when his home was attacked.

Unaccompanied children are not allowed into the new container shelters and the Jules Ferry centre for women and children is full. The tents and volunteer support network are about to be bulldozed and there is no safeguarding plan in place at all. There is a massive reality gap between what the Minister said and what is happening on the ground. Save the Children warns that things are extremely chaotic and this is making “an appalling situation for children even worse.”

This is dangerous. The Minister well knows that there is a serious risk that those children will now just disappear into the hands of traffickers, criminal gangs or prostitution—another 400 children on top of the 10,000 who Europol says have already disappeared in Europe.

Some of those children have their closest family here in the UK. Citizens UK estimates that there are up to 150 such children. That is why they are there, rather than heading to Germany or Sweden, and the Government say they agree that child refugees should be reunited with their family. They also agree that if their closest family is in the UK, they should be able to apply here for asylum, and have promised funding to help that happen. A court case confirms that relatives in Britain should be able to look after children while they apply, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has offered to process cases and speed things up, but that is not happening for the kids in Calais. Even if they manage to apply, their cases are taking nine months. They do not have nine months—their remaining tents are being bulldozed now.

So will the Minister make urgent representations to the French Government to provide immediate safeguarding support for children and young people, and not to remove their accommodation until there is somewhere safer for them to go? Will he accept the offer from the UNHCR to help process applications and set up a fast system to reunite children with family who are here? Finally, will he agree to Lord Dubs’ amendment to help child refugees?

The Minister has talked a good game on stopping trafficking and modern slavery, and he is right to be appalled at the criminal gangs, but this is where it gets real. The Minister has the power now to stop the trafficking of hundreds of children on our doorstep. Will he do it?

James Brokenshire: We do take our responsibilities seriously, as I indicated in the statement that I made to the House. On the level of alternative accommodation, I mentioned the welcome centres that are available around
other parts of France, which now number more than 100. Around 2,500 people have left those camps to go to the reception centres. I stress the importance of getting asylum claims into the system in France.

The right hon. Lady highlights, rightly, the interests of children in and around the camps. We are obviously aware of the containerised accommodation adjacent to the Calais camp. Priority, we understand, is being given to women, children and other vulnerable migrants. This is in addition to the 400 places in heated tents already available for women and children.

In response to the right hon. Lady’s point about close family members, I can tell her that we remain committed to our obligations under Dublin III. The UK and France are running a joint communication centre at the camp, which informs individuals of their rights to claim asylum in France and gives them information on family reunification.

Equally, to assist in the handling of such cases, the UK and France have established a senior-level standing committee and agreed single points of contact with respective Dublin units, and the UK is about to second an asylum expert to the French administration to facilitate the improvement of all stages of the process of identifying, protecting and transferring any relevant cases to the UK.

The right hon. Lady referred to a period of nine months, but it should take nowhere near that amount of time. We remain committed to seeing an efficient and effective process for what we judge to be a small number of cases that might have that direct connection to the UK. She will also be aware of the broader family reunification provisions, over and above Dublin, that would allow children to be reunited with their parents, with direct applications not only from France, but from elsewhere in Europe and, indeed, from the region, where there is that direct link. The Government have also committed an additional £10 million through the Department for International Development to support better reunification and to assist children in transit in Europe, but we are very cautious not to make an already difficult situation even worse.

Therefore, the emphasis is on giving practical support to the French Government, who are leading in this regard, and providing expert support. Equally, there is the support that we are giving in Greece, Italy and countries in the region so that such children are more easily identified and helped at the earliest opportunity.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right that the best way to protect the maximum number of vulnerable children is by minimising the number who are taken to live in squalor in the camps outside Calais in an attempt to make a dangerous and illegal crossing to this country, and the way to do that is by maintaining our close co-operation with the French authorities and doing what we can to strengthen the Dublin convention. Does he agree that the worst thing this country could do is anything that would disrupt our close relationship with the French authorities on this matter?

**James Brokenshire:** I agree with my right hon. Friend. We have established a very close working relationship between the UK and French Governments, and between the Home Secretary and Bernard Cazeneuve. There are regular meetings at that level and at operational level, highlighting the exchange of expertise to which I have already referred. My right hon. Friend is right; we will need to maintain that sort of support in the months and years ahead.

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for raising this issue. The Opposition have repeatedly raised the plight of the 26,000 or so unaccompanied children in Europe, who are in desperate need of protection. I listened to what the Minister said this afternoon, and I have listened to what he has said before, but there is, as my right hon. Friend has said, a reality gap here.

I have been to see the camps in Calais and Dunkirk for myself. The squalor is hard to describe, and it is worse in Dunkirk than it is in Calais. There are 300 or so unaccompanied children in Calais, and they are not there by choice. In Dunkirk the conditions are such that the volunteers—there are only eight of them—are so busy trying to keep people safe and provide them with somewhere to sleep that they cannot even count the number of unaccompanied children. There is no process on the ground for these children, there is no meaningful advice for them and the reunification rules are not working. That is the reality on the ground. We have to start from that position. That was all borne out by the judgment of the upper tribunal in January.

The situation is now urgent because of the action that has been taken today. I urge the Minister to look at the issue again and consider what practical support can be given in the next 24 hours to these desperate children, who until now have not had the support they need.

**James Brokenshire:** The joint declaration signed between the UK and French Governments last August actually provides for the direct financial support that we are giving to the French Government to provide the centres outside the immediate area of Calais. Indeed, as I have already highlighted, there is the Jules Ferry centre, and there is the work we are doing on a regular basis to identify and highlight the appropriate support that is there. I stress again: there is no need for people to be in those conditions. There are services—[Interruption.]

**James Brokenshire:** There are facilities and services away from the camps that are available to support people. We take our responsibilities seriously, which is why—[Interruption.]

**James Brokenshire:** The hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) keeps interjecting from the Opposition Front Bench. We are working closely with the French Government to see that there are experts in place, and I have already indicated that an additional person is going out next week to see that there are procedures in place so that there will be efficient and effective reunification for what I judge to be a small number of cases. However, support and alternative accommodation are available in France, and I would urge people to take up those choices.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): I am glad the Government put a high priority on reuniting children with their parents, or orphans with close relatives—that is the best answer. However, is it not the case that the European Council’s conclusions at its last meeting were very clear: the best way to help is to prevent these things from happening in future, by ensuring that the EU enforces its border controls when people first enter the
EU and provides safeguarding and support for those who need it when they first enter the EU, rather than putting them through the ordeal of a long journey across the whole of its territory?

James Brokenshire: It is also about ensuring that there is support in and around the region to prevent people from going out in boats, putting children's lives at risk. That is why the work done at the London conference, in providing additional education to ensure there is a sense of positive hope, was absolutely the right thing to do. That was backed up by our £2.3 billion commitment to aid and assistance in and around the region. My right hon. Friend is right about ensuring that the hotspots initiative is in place to see that help and support are given at the first opportunity, and that is what the Government are committed to doing.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Does the Minister not understand that France's Dublin procedures for unaccompanied children are just not fit for purpose and that it takes up to a year even for take charge requests to be issued? In that light, should we not be welcoming, rather than challenging, the recent tribunal decision in ZAT to shortcut the admission of three children from the horrendous Calais camps so that they can join their families here? As the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) suggested, should we not be looking to welcome the other 100 or so Calais children identified by Citizens UK as having family in the UK, so that they, too, can be reunited with their loved ones? Just how much public money has been spent on litigation in this case in an attempt to prevent refugee children in Calais from reaching their families here? Would not that money be far better spent on ensuring that Dublin III processes are fit for purpose and on safeguarding those children?

James Brokenshire: The most appropriate thing to do is to see that those young children receive help and support at the earliest opportunity, which is why I emphasise again the need to see that asylum claims are made quickly in the French system. The Dublin III arrangements can operate effectively; indeed, senior French representatives have told us they see no reason why appropriate claims cannot be completed within a period of two months. There are clear processes and procedures that should be adopted, and we urge everyone to get behind them and make them work effectively.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): As other hon. Members have said, the conditions in the region. My right hon. Friend is right about ensuring that Dublin III processes are fit for purpose and on safeguarding those children?

James Brokenshire: The number of asylum claims made in and around the area of Calais over the recent year or so is about 2,800, and there has been a significant increase, which we support and encourage. We have people who go into the camps to deliver and make very clear the message about the need to make claims quickly so that assistance can be provided.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): On our visit to The Hague last week, the Home Affairs Committee was told that 90% of migrants who enter the European Union had been able to do so because of criminal gangs. Will the Minister tell the House how many people have been prosecuted by individual countries as a result of that smuggling? The long-term solution is the proper operation of the hotspots that have been created in Italy and in Greece, and, as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) said, the tracking of children before they have to make the long journey to Calais. The short-term solution is for the Minister to ring his opposite number in France to see whether a more humanitarian approach can be arrived at, because this is the fault of the French Government, who have been warned about Calais and have done nothing about it.

James Brokenshire: I think that is an unfair criticism. The French Government have taken significant steps to provide alternative accommodation and to see that there is information so that people are able to make their asylum claims effectively. However, the right hon. Gentleman makes a powerful and important point about the role of organised crime. The figure of about 90% that he highlighted has been confirmed by Europol, so the work we are doing with our organised immigration crime taskforce is absolutely right. By getting intelligence to Europol, we are taking action against gangs that, frankly, do not care whether these young people live or die.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have a great deal of time for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Will my right hon. Friend outline the UNHCR's role in Calais?

James Brokenshire: We are working closely with the UNHCR in relation to the resettlement programme, particularly through work in-region to see how unaccompanied children could potentially come to this country. The UNHCR is monitoring the situation in and around northern France but, as far as I am aware, has no formal remit.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Minister is aware that for 12 years we have had juxtaposed immigration controls in the northern ports of France. How does he think one official will be able quickly to determine the asylum claims to be refugees here in Britain of the 50 children identified by respectable charities as having family in the UK? One person cannot do that job.

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Lady should be aware that there is not just one person but a senior-level connection between officials in both Governments, so broader teams are working on these exchanges. If there is information to support a claim highlighting a close family connection under the Dublin III regulation, we will stand by our obligations.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I strongly welcome the considerable efforts that the Government have made to keep children and families
together close to places where many of the refugees come from, such as Syria. However, if 300 minors were living in a squalid camp in Dover, they would be taken into care and given a place of safety, and there would be an investigation into the adults responsible for getting them there, so why is that not happening in France?

James Brokenshire: I cannot comment on the operations of the French Government, but I can say that we stand ready to support them in joint efforts to see that children and other refugees are appropriately housed and supported. We are providing funding to identify vulnerable children and ensure that the necessary facilities are there. We have given and will continue to give the French Government that support.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, if these were British children, the test that would have to be applied to the Government’s actions would be that of the best interests of the child. The Minister is describing colluding with the French Government in a process that will push these children into the hands of people traffickers. Is he really saying that we apply such a different standard to the children of refugees compared with our own?

James Brokenshire: I utterly reject the right hon. Gentleman’s assertion. The joint working that our enforcement agencies are engaged in in confronting the people traffickers, going after the gangs and seeing that there is not such exploitation is part of the joint agreement that was signed last August. We are supporting the French Government to identify the vulnerable and see that they are given support, and we will continue to do so.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Will the Minister give a categorical assurance that children and young people who have a legitimate claim to be in the UK because of having close family relatives here will not be disadvantaged by starting their asylum claim in France? Because of having close family relatives here will not be people who have a legitimate claim to be in the UK are given support, and we will continue to do so.

James Brokenshire: The UNHCR has offered to set up a fast process for us. The Minister has implied, but not yet said, that he has told it no, so will he be specific and say whether he has told it yes or no?

James Brokenshire: French non-governmental organisations operate in the camps to help identify unaccompanied children and to help them to register with the authorities so that they can be properly looked after. That is the right approach, and it is precisely what the French Government seek to do. There is a process between the French Government and the asylum system, and that is the way in which assistance can be given. I strongly urge everyone to get behind that process, to ensure that children in need receive the care they require.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The fact that there are many unaccompanied children wandering across Europe without any effective means of support is the biggest stain on how the European Union is operating its border and asylum policy. Will the Minister confirm that many thousands more children would be in such an awful plight were it not for the fact that this Government are providing such a huge amount of aid to Syria and neighbouring countries so that other children do not make this perilous journey?

James Brokenshire: I entirely support what my hon. Friend says about the impact that aid assistance is having on the region. There is a sense of support, hope and opportunity for young people to get the education they need and to be well looked after. Equally, we will continue to work with other European partners on the entry points into the EU, to ensure that the people who have made journeys are processed and that children with claims of settlement are reunited with their parents.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): May I politely say to the Minister, and through him to his French counterpart, that this response is just not good enough? The real danger for children is now, during the demolition and dispersal of the camps in Calais and Dunkirk, when they are at real risk of being picked up by the gangs responsible for child sexual exploitation and people trafficking. Will the Minister get on with putting in place a proper and coherent registration system so that children can be picked up by the relevant authorities and looked after as they should be?

James Brokenshire: My understanding is that the French Government are approaching this work on a phased basis. Places of worship and schools will not be subject to the clearance as a consequence of the court ruling, and the French authorities are focused on areas with unoccupied tents and are encouraging migrants who remain to move to the new accommodation in Calais or elsewhere in France. On children in need of support, I underline again the need to ensure that claims are made, and the NGOs are going in there and helping to identify children in need of help.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): The Minister will remember the evidence given by the Mayor of Calais to the Home Affairs Committee and what she has said in public, which is that the majority of those in the camps have been informed that they need to claim asylum in France, but they do not want to do so because
they want to come to the UK. Does he agree that it is incumbent on the French Government and the Calais authorities to ensure that children, who cannot make asylum applications on their own, are assisted in doing so, and that adults are informed again that they must claim asylum in France, which is a safe country?

James Brokenshire: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Again, I underline the fact that there are French NGOs operating in the camp to identify unaccompanied children and ensure that claims can be made.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Minister has said that for unaccompanied children with family connections claiming asylum in France, the process should take two months. How long do the UK Government say the asylum process should take for children with family connections in the United Kingdom, and what practical steps is he going to take to ensure that that is achieved?

James Brokenshire: In respect of asylum processing and deciding whether to uphold claims, we in this country have done a great deal to ensure that claims are properly assessed and that straightforward claims are dealt with within six months. The Government have done a great deal of hard work to introduce that effectiveness into the system, and that has been recognised in the recent independent inspector’s report.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Minister agree that we and the French Government should make efforts to encourage people to seek assistance in France from the authorities, rather than living in squalor, vulnerable to criminal gangs? Does he also agree that we must make sure that we have strong security at our borders, so that people realise that it is not worth putting their lives in the hands of people traffickers, because they will end up losing their lives, as so many have done?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend knows from his constituency interests the work that the Government have done to secure the port area around Calais and the Eurotunnel terminal at Coquelles. We keep that security under review in a joint group with the French Government. He makes the powerful and important point that asylum claims should be made at the earliest opportunity so that help and assistance can be given at the earliest opportunity.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The press are reporting this afternoon that riot police are using tear gas and water cannon to support the destruction of the “jungle” camp. I do not know whether that is what the Minister meant by the French authorities engaging with young people and encouraging them to move on. Given that there is plenty of money to provide fencing, and bilateral co-operation with the French, why can he not simply get together with his French counterpart, identify the young people who have a legal right to come to the UK and get them over here immediately?

James Brokenshire: It is a clear question of people claiming asylum, and children are being supported by the work of the NGOs that the French Government have put in place precisely for that purpose. We have taken a consistent joint approach, building on the agreement of last August, to support the French Government in their work to ensure that those in need of help get it.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Everyone has concerns for vulnerable children in the camps in Calais. When children have identified that they have relatives in the UK, how many of those relatives the UK Government are preventing from travelling to France to be reunited with the children? Why does he think refugees would rather be in the UK than in France?

James Brokenshire: These issues are often complex. The factor at the forefront of our minds is always what is in the best interests of the child. When we receive applications under Dublin or under family reunification, we always have to assess what is in the best interests of the child and whether the parents or other close family members can support the child. We give that focus to every case.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Exactly a week ago, I asked the Prime Minister for an assurance that the United Kingdom Government’s response to the refugee crisis would be driven entirely by humanitarian need and not influenced in any way by considerations of the impact that it might have on the referendum that is likely to happen at the end of June. The Prime Minister was either unable or unwilling to give such a general assurance last week. Will the Immigration Minister please give that assurance, at least in relation to these most desperate and vulnerable young people?

James Brokenshire: I think that the hon. Gentleman can see from the Government’s actions that we take our responsibilities very seriously. With the funding that we have committed not just in and around Syria but in Europe, and with the additional £10 million fund that the Department for International Development is operating to ensure that children in transit who are in need of help, counselling or other support can receive it, that is precisely what we will do.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Has the Minister any discussions with his French counterpart to find out the reasons why the migrants in Calais did not claim asylum in the other safe countries that they travelled through before arriving in France?

James Brokenshire: The reasons are often quite complex. The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee highlighted the role of people traffickers and smugglers, as well as those who sell false hope through a whole host of different means and networks, including social media. Other reasons may relate to the existing diaspora communities and the whole issue of language. Through the actions on which we are supporting the French Government, and indeed those that we are taking ourselves in the camps, we are giving the clear message that people should claim asylum in France.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Salford) (Lab): I say to the Minister in all earnestness that there is precious little evidence of UK expertise on the ground in any of the camps. He was wrong in what he said about Christian places of worship, because one was wiped out by the
French authorities just a few weeks ago. What advice would he give to the likes of the Caritas Social Action Network, Citizens UK and civil society organisations, as well as elected Members and anyone trying to help individuals who have the right of leave to remain in the UK or who have a close family connection, about how they can continue to give such help?

James Brokenshire: I would say to anyone in that situation that they should claim asylum in France, which will ensure that there is a direct connection and that we can make the system work. I stress that the fact that different messages are being given does not help the situation. In respect of the whole issue of the clearance of the camps, I understand that the court specifically ruled that it should go ahead with the exception of places of worship and schools. The French Government should therefore adopt that approach in the actions they are taking.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Before I entered this place, I worked as counsel on hundreds of asylum and trafficking cases. A core principle of the Dublin regulations is that the first country of entry should take responsibility for the claimant, which imports fairness and equity into the system. Will my right hon. Friend reassure the House of his commitment to that principle, and confirm that to discard it without legal basis would be undemocratic and illegitimate?

James Brokenshire: I agree with my hon. Friend about the benefits and the strength of the Dublin arrangements. We believe that they should be upheld, not undermined. They include the core principle that those who make a claim should do so in the first safe country in which they arrive. Equally, the principle of family reunification for close family members operates under Dublin III, and the Government stand by that principle.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I recently met constituents from St Stephen’s church in Worcester who have been to the camp in Dunkirk. They describe the situation for children as appalling. There is very poor sanitation, and with men-only kitchens, there is a danger that children and the women looking after them are missing out on food. I completely agree with the Minister that everyone in the camps should claim asylum in France, but where that does not happen over a long period, what more can we do to reach out and get that information to the most vulnerable? How can we make sure that the humanitarian assistance that reaches the camps reaches the most vulnerable in the camps?

James Brokenshire: I again underline the specific facilities there, such as the 400 places for women and children, and the 1,500 places in the new containerised area. We are giving support at 102 centres away from the Calais area to which people can go to receive support, which will ensure that they can make their case. On the specific element of vulnerability, we are supporting the French Government and ensuring that the NGOs are in the camps. Equally, our own officers are going into the camps to reiterate the message that help and support can be given, and that the way to get it is to claim asylum. In that way, we can ensure that assistance is given as early as possible.
EU Referendum: Civil Service Guidance

4.13 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement about the instructions issued by the Cabinet Secretary to permanent secretaries in respect of EU referendum guidance for the civil service and special advisers.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): The referendum on 23 June on the European Union represents the biggest constitutional decision for the nation in a generation. The Government’s position is clear: Britain will be stronger, safer and better off remaining in a reformed European Union. Today’s Government document setting out the process of leaving underlines that case, showing that a vote to leave could lead to up to a decade or more of damaging uncertainty, with real consequences putting jobs and investment at risk. I concur with that assessment.

Because of the significance of the referendum, as the House knows the Prime Minister took the decision to allow collective responsibility to be suspended on the referendum question. This approach was discussed and agreed by the Cabinet on 20 February. The process is clear: Ministers may depart from the Government position in a personal capacity on the specific question of the referendum. On all other matters, including on other EU business, the Government will operate as normal, and in all things the civil servants support the Government position.

Guidance on how this will work in practice was set out and published by the Cabinet Secretary last week. The guidance is clear. Other than on the specific question of the referendum, all Ministers can commission and see all documents, as normal. On the question of the referendum—and on this question alone—Ministers who disagree with the Government position naturally cannot commission policy work on the in/out question or see documents setting out details of the case to remain. All Ministers can ask for factual briefing, and for facts to be checked in any matter. All Ministers can see documents on EU issues not related to the referendum question, as normal.

The guidance is clear and has been published. The process was agreed at Cabinet as the best way to manage the unusual situation of Ministers who disagree with the Government remaining in post. I hope that this clarity will allow Members on both sides of the House to focus on the main debate about whether Britain will be better served by leaving or remaining in a reformed European Union and then let the people decide.

Mr Jenkin: Clarity on this issue is one thing that we do not have. Nobody objects to the Government making their case in the referendum, but most people expect the civil service to be impartial in carrying out its support for Ministers. It is established in law that Ministers are accountable for their Departments. Voters expect Government facts and figures to be impartial and accurate, whether they are used by Ministers who support remain or leave.

Why does the Cabinet Secretary’s letter go far beyond the limits that were placed on dissenting Ministers in the 1975 referendum? Sir Peter Thornton, the permanent secretary of the then Secretary of State for Trade, Peter Shore, was quoted as saying:

“It was jolly difficult putting forward anti-Common Market briefs to Mr. Shore, but I hope we did what he asked”.

What a different atmosphere from today!

Worse than that, a Q and A briefing that has been circulated following the letter states that Ministers may not see any papers that

“have a bearing on the referendum question or are intended to be used in support of their position on the referendum”.

That has been described by one Minister, the Minister for Employment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), as “unconstitutional”. How can such a wide ban be justified?

How does my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office reconcile this with his comment on Radio 4 this morning that

“the Government is functioning on all questions, other than specifically the in/out question, in an entirely normal way”?

He also said:

“There are no rules other than those set out last Monday in the letter from Jeremy Heywood.”

What about the Q and A briefing?

Does the Minister deny that permanent secretaries have been instructed to conceal information requested by Downing Street or the Cabinet Office from a dissenting Minister? The Cabinet Secretary’s letter states that “Departments may check facts”, but civil servants have also been told that they cannot “provide arguments or new facts”.

How is that consistent with the duty of honesty in the civil service code, which requires a civil servant to

“set out the facts and relevant issues truthfully”?

Does the Minister agree that where any guidance or instruction conflicts with the code, the code must prevail?

How does this situation best serve the democratic process if Ministers on opposing sides of the debate finish up disagreeing about information from the same Department which is meant to be impartial and accurate information provided by professional civil servants?

Matthew Hancock: Let me answer those points in turn. First, the Government are functioning perfectly well—in fact, I came to this House from a meeting with the Minister for Employment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), on childcare policy, and it was carried out in an entirely normal way. On Friday I visited a prison with the Justice Secretary, and those two points demonstrate that things are functioning as normal.

The civil service code, and the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, makes it clear that it is the duty of civil servants to support the position of the Government of the day, and it is only because the Prime Minister is allowing Ministers to remain in government while disagreeing with a single policy—the in/out position—that this situation arises at all. The letter from the Cabinet Secretary makes it clear that factual briefing is allowed.

Finally, the 1975 guidance made it clear that no briefing or draft speeches contrary to Government consideration were allowed to be drafted by civil servants. In fact, it went further because it said that if someone wanted to oppose the Government position, they had
Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I fear that the Minister is having a Jim Hacker moment. In 114 days, the country faces an important decision. The referendum will dictate how in future the UK handles exports and imports, the world of work, the new contours of the digital age, human rights, intelligence sharing, the fight against crime, and how we adapt to climate change, and here we are today discussing guidelines for civil servants and special advisers.

Sadly, I am not in the strongest of positions to lecture the poor Minister on handling splits in his party, but in the way that Opposition Front Benchers are almost duty bound to do, I would like to give him some advice. The Justice Secretary has a history of letting his special advisers off the leash. Does the Minister really think that a memorandum from a mandarin will change that?

When we have a Prime Minister who allows his spin doctors to brief that the Justice Secretary will be sacked after the referendum, or that his chum the Mayor of London has breached the old school code and that the Prime Minister is “hurt and upset”, I understand how the Minister would have been overcome with a wave of ennui at the prospect of answering an urgent question from the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee about the conduct of special advisers. However, answer for their conduct he must, and I wish to ask him how many special advisers have informed No. 10 of their intention to work on the no campaign. In the event of ministerial visits where a Minister and their special adviser campaign for a no vote after the event, will the cost of travel be carried by the Minister? How will that be monitored and made public? The guidelines state that special advisers are not allowed to campaign for a no vote in office hours. For the avoidance of doubt, please define “office hours”.

When the inevitable happens and special advisers to those Ministers who are defying their leader completely ignore the memorandum from the Cabinet Secretary, on a scale of one to 10 how confident is the Minister that the Prime Minister will enforce the code? Does the Minister have the confidence to admit that these attempts to dilute the freedom of rebellious Ministers will only detract from the key issues that matter to voters in the referendum? It seems that the out campaign is attacking itself with the avoidance of doubt, please define “office hours”.

Matthew Hancock: Unfortunately, I have had to scrap most of my proposed reply to the hon. Gentleman, given his gracious acknowledgement that he is not best placed to throw rocks on this particular subject. I will, however, agree with him on this: questions on this matter are a distraction from the main event and the main substance, which is whether Britain is better off inside or outside a reformed European Union. I strongly believe that, thanks to the deal the Prime Minister achieved, we are better off and more secure inside a reformed European Union.

The hon. Gentleman asked some specific questions. First, on the efficacy of the guidance, the guidance is for civil servants to follow. Civil servants do follow guidance of that sort and I have every confidence that they will do so. On what constitutes office hours, I will merely say that office hours means the normal working day. I hope that clears that one up. On the broader question of whether this is necessary, and his point that Ministers need both to run their Departments and be able to differ on this one question, this is why the guidance is very specifically and solely about the in/out question, not other EU business or other business. After all, we have Departments to run.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend is hugely able and has shown his ability today to dance on the head of a pin, but will he take it from me that this is a huge blunder? Out there, the general public will think that this decision is petty and vindictive. Moreover, they will say to our Government, and to this party to which I am so proud to belong, that if we are so much stronger in Europe, what is it that we are being so careful to hide?

Matthew Hancock: I have a huge amount of respect for my hon. Friend. I will just say this: the reason this is required is the Prime Minister’s decision to allow Ministers to campaign to leave and to differ from the Government position. If that were not the case, the guidance would not be needed. As for the general public, I imagine that what most people will take away from this will be: when can we get on to the real discussion about whether we should be in or out of a reformed European Union?

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Let me see if I have got this right. The Government’s position is that we should vote to remain in the European Union because, among other reasons, it will be good for jobs and employment. The Government’s problem is that the Secretary of State and the Minister responsible for jobs and employment take a contrary view. The Government are now in a dilemma. Not only do they not want their own Ministers not to support the Government’s position, but they do not want them to actively campaign against it and use their offices to do so. In response, the Government are now putting the obligation on unelected civil servants to censor what Ministers can or cannot see within their area of expertise. This situation is farcical, but it has an undercurrent of something sinister about it too. Any self-respecting Minister should not accept these constraints. There is already a bit of tension in the Minister’s party on this question. How long does he think it will be before it breaks out into all-out civil war?

Matthew Hancock: The hon. Gentleman makes a central error in his characterisation of the situation. No Minister is censored—far from it. Ministers are allowed to campaign against the Government position. It is for civil servants, therefore, to follow the Government position. After all, it is required by law that they follow and support the position of the Government of the day.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): There is a serious constitutional issue here, which goes to the heart of House of Commons accountability. We ask Ministers questions and expect answers that are fully informed. How can those who send us to the House of
Commons have faith in the answers we get if those whom we question purposely have information withheld by their own civil servants?

Matthew Hancock: I have a huge amount of respect for my right hon. Friend. That is why I will answer his specific point. The question is exactly the reason for prescribing this guidance only in respect of the in/out issue rather than more broadly. That is what the guidance says. This broad approach was set up by the Prime Minister in January, and then discussed and agreed in Cabinet on 20 February as the best way to take forward the position whereby Ministers could disagree with the Government position.

Mr Speaker: It is very decent of the Minister to dole out bowls full of respect, but my sense is that, on the whole, although that is enormously important to hon. and right hon. Members here assembled, they are generally more interested in his answers than in his respect.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I previously asked whether the Prime Minister was going to throw his weight behind the in campaign, and I am very pleased that he has done so, because for the sake of our peace, prosperity, opportunity and security, we need to be in. As for what we are discussing now, I would like some clarity from the Minister. Is it the case that there is a list of Ministers who are in, a list of Ministers who are out and a list of Ministers who are undecided, and what happens if a Minister switches from the in to the out campaign or the out to the in campaign?

Matthew Hancock: First of all, Mr Speaker, I have respect for the right hon. Gentleman, and I also have respect for you—but perhaps I will drop all that. When the Cabinet met after the Prime Minister agreed the deal with other members of the European Union, Ministers at that point were asked to state their position—whether they wanted to remain or leave—and I doubt whether any of those positions will change.

Mr Speaker: Veritably, my cup runneth over at the generosity and good grace of the Minister, to whom we are indebted.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Minister calls on the law. The question of voter trust in this referendum, as I said to both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary on 3 and 25 February, is paramount. For the voters who will decide this question, knowledge is, as we know, power. Does the Minister deny that there is a list of Ministers who are in, a list of Ministers who are out and a list of Ministers who are undecided, and that there is a list of Ministers who are in, a list of Ministers who are out and a list of Ministers who are undecided, and that this therefore being a statutory obligation to me when the House debated that Bill, through and from the Government and all Ministers of the Crown equally, and that this therefore being a statutory obligation overrides any prime ministerial prerogative such as the Cabinet Secretary acted upon in the guidance of 23 February? Does the Minister therefore deny that civil servants as Crown servants are legally obliged to provide such information accurately and impartially to all Ministers within their Departments so that the voters are properly informed and empowered to answer the question in the referendum?

Matthew Hancock: On the legal details, the 2015 Act also requires the Government to express their view and the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 requires civil servants to support the position of the Government of the day. On that basis, it is right to follow the procedure that was agreed by the Cabinet. The position of the Government is set out; Ministers may disagree with it, but civil servants must support the Government’s position.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Here we are on the day after the Oscars. The family is opposite: threat and counter-threat. It reminds me of “The Godfather”. This could be “The Godfather Part IV”: will there be a horse’s head in the bed or will it be another animal?

Matthew Hancock: Well, they say that politics is show business for ugly people, so I will take that as an upgrade.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I find it hard to believe that on 20 February the Cabinet was aware of the implications of what it was doing. The central purpose of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 was to achieve fairness in elections and in referendums, but now the Government have parked themselves on one side of the argument, dwarfing any influence from either of the campaign groups. Their action also goes against the strategic objective of offering the people a referendum to resolve the question of Britain’s role in the world one way or another. That question will hold only if the process is seen to be fair, but all this runs against that strategic objective.

Matthew Hancock: I disagree with my hon. Friend. The Government are required, under the European Union Referendum Act 2015, to take a position. They are also required—or commitments were given during the passage of that Act—to set out certain matters, including the process of leaving the European Union under article 50, which is in a document that we published this morning. During the passage of the referendum Act, there was a debate on how this could best be done, and we are acting on the conclusions that were reached.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Is this not constitutional gibberish, and utterly unworkable? The protestations that we hear from Ministers now would be much more impressive had they joined our Select Committee in condemning the politicisation of the civil service during the Scottish referendum campaign. The difference is that, whereas all Ministers agreed in the case of the Scottish referendum, in this case we have a disagreement, and a Department in which the “inners” can see the papers and the “outers” cannot. Is it not a fact that the only way of making this workable is for Ministers to resign and leave office until after 23 June?

Matthew Hancock: It is precisely because we did not want that to happen that we proposed these arrangements. I think that the hon. Gentleman is wholly wrong, and misjudging the position, if he thinks that supporting
the Government’s position is anything other than an impartial and proper course for civil servants to take. The alternative is to argue that civil servants should not support the Government’s position, and I think that that would be ridiculous.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): On a daily basis, Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have to make difficult choices between the interpretation of European law and regulation and the delivery of decisions that would benefit United Kingdom citizens. I have dealt with a number of cases in the past which I would like to discuss with the current Minister of State. I shall be meeting him this evening. Will I be able to ask him questions about past cases, so that he can, without fear or favour, have access to a full briefing, all the opinions and all the history of what happened before and after the decision concerned, although the end result might be thoroughly dis obliging to the case for remaining in the European Union?

Matthew Hancock: My right hon. Friend has made an important point. On European Union issues that do not relate to the single question of in or out, there will be full access to all papers, as normal. That is what is said in the letter from the Cabinet Secretary, and that is how the Government are operating.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): During the referendum on Scottish independence, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), there was significant controversy over senior civil servants making public and clearly political, and politicised, statements. It is vital for the civil service to retain its private advisory role, and for civil servants not to make blatantly political public comments during the campaign before the EU referendum. Will the Minister confirm that that will be the case?

Matthew Hancock: That is the normal course of events. It is for Ministers to make the argument, and for civil servants to support the Government’s position.

Mr Speaker: Mr David Davis.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I was not standing, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is a most dextrous parliamentarian, and I am sure that he can recover very quickly. I think the accurate characterisation would be that he had been standing. He did not do so on this occasion, probably because he was chuntering from a sedentary position. He then stood again at my exhortation. He has now had plenty of time in which to formulate his question.

Mr Davis: It is all right, Mr Speaker. I was not sure whether it was the other David Davies whom you were calling.

We are fortunate to live in a democracy. We are not guided by Cabinet Secretary guidelines. As far as I know there is no manifesto basis for this, and as far as I know there has been no House of Commons vote for it, so what is the constitutional basis of the Prime Minister’s decision? Is it the royal prerogative?

Matthew Hancock: No, the constitutional basis is that, under the European Union Referendum Act 2015, the Government are required to take a position. The Government have taken a position as I have set out, and it is for civil servants to support that position. It is therefore necessary to set out how civil servants should act with a Minister who does not support the Government position. The guidance is precisely limited to the in/out question, and the reason for publishing it is to ensure that everyone knows what the position is.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Sir Nicholas Macpherson, the Treasury’s most senior civil servant, was quoted as saying that he believed that impartiality guidelines did not apply in “extreme” cases such as the Scottish independence referendum. Would the Minister classify the EU referendum as an extreme case, and if so, can we expect normal rules of civil service neutrality to be completely disregarded?

Matthew Hancock: Civil servants support the position of the Government of the day, and this Government have a position. I do not know how many times I am going to have to repeat that. That is the case. Civil servants are impartial, but they support the Government of the day. That is the law and it is the situation in this case too.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Does the Paymaster General agree that it would be supremely ironic if this referendum had an impact on the way in which our civil service operated in the future? It is absolutely right that the civil service should support the Government, and the Government have made the decision—the right decision, in my view—that we are safer, stronger and better in the European Union.

Matthew Hancock: It is disappointing that the leave campaign seems to want to focus on process issues such as this rather than discussing whether we would be better off inside a reformed European Union, as I believe we would. My hon. Friend raises an important point. If any Members do not think that the rules should operate in the way we published last week, the only other position would be for the civil service to support a position that was not the Government’s position, which would go against everything that it was set up to do.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Is not the Prime Minister effectively saying to his own Ministers, “You can exercise your democratic rights as long as you agree with me at the end of the day”? Is this not the latest sordid attempt—there will be more—to rig the referendum to get the result that the Prime Minister wants?

Matthew Hancock: No; on the contrary, this is a consequence of allowing Ministers to express their views freely on whether they want to remain in or to leave, as many of them are doing.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the misunderstanding of the Government’s position has been evidenced by the last question, which suggested that the Prime Minister required Ministers to agree with him? That is not the case. The public will surely agree that fairness is ensured
by the fact that Ministers are free to speak out. That is what the Prime Minister is allowing, and that is a generous position. There is no reason why those Ministers should be supported by the civil service or the taxpayer in expressing their view, to which they are entitled in conscience. If they feel that this is unfair, they have the option of not remaining in the Government.

Matthew Hancock: Yes.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Lord Chancellor has an important constitutional job, but he cannot do it under these restrictions. At the weekend, we heard that the so-called British Bill of Rights was going to be postponed again, for at least six months. If the Lord Chancellor wants his lawyers or civil servants to put together well-crafted arguments on parliamentary sovereignty or the powers of the European Court of Justice, should not they be allowed to do that? Otherwise, we shall be getting second-class government, and God forbid that we should have that.

Matthew Hancock: Of course the Lord Chancellor can continue to do the work that he is doing in reforming the courts system and in all sorts of areas. Indeed, I visited a prison with him on Friday, as I have mentioned. That shows that the Government are getting on with their work. On top of that, we are having a debate in the country and between Ministers on both sides on the specific question of an in/out referendum.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): When people in Bedford and Kempston have raised the issue of the European referendum with me over the past week, they have wanted to hear the facts. They hear lots of statistics, but they fear that they are being warped by one side or the other, so they want facts. How will this restriction on access to information enable those people to get the facts?

Matthew Hancock: It will not have any implications for facts, because factual briefing and fact-checking is allowed to be done by civil servants.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The civil service, the state broadcaster and the central bank were all central players in project fear 1 in Scotland. Is it therefore naive not to expect the use of the same public assets on project fear 2 and the EU referendum?

Matthew Hancock: I do not understand the premise of the question, because we are putting forward the positive case for remaining in a reformed European Union.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Will the Minister set out what the harm would be in allowing full transparency of these data? Surely there would be much greater harm if at the end of the referendum we were left with people feeling that it had been an unfair process.

Matthew Hancock: The challenge of taking a position other than the one the Government have taken is that it would require civil servants to do work that was not in support of the Government’s position. The Government have a position, and it is part of the civil service code, and it is put into law in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, that civil servants should support the position of the Government. It would put civil servants in a very difficult position if we were to do anything other than that.

Andrew Gwyne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I will be campaigning for Britain to remain in the EU, but I see no issue with all Ministers having access to the very strong arguments for Britain to remain in the EU—this is a matter of democracy. Is the Minister really suggesting that we could have a situation where a Secretary of State is denied access to key Government papers but his or her junior Ministers have access to that information?

Matthew Hancock: What we are saying is that the Government have a position and the civil service will advise on that position. If Ministers have taken a personal decision to campaign personally, in a personal capacity, against the position of the Government, it is inappropriate to ask civil servants to support that other position, which is not the position of the Government.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much appreciate that the Minister has qualified and cavedated some of the guidance that has recently been issued. Does he not agree, however, that there is a danger that without further clarification we could have the ludicrous situation where Freedom of Information Act requests, or requests made by Members of Parliament through parliamentary questions, could get information out of Ministers that those Ministers would have been denied by their own civil servants?

Matthew Hancock: I do not know whether that was directed at people on the shadow Front Bench, but the situation is as I have set out. The key point is this: if we were to take any other position, we would have civil servants being asked not to support the position of the Government. We are approaching this in the way these things have been approached in referendums in the past—in 1975 and in the Scottish referendum—which seems perfectly reasonable.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Because this is such a divisive issue and because so many people feel so strongly about it, it has been decided that instead of Government taking the decision, the people should take the decision. What does it do for the sense of fairness among the people if the big battalions of the civil service seem to be lined up on one side of the argument and spin doctors in Downing Street do botched letters to the press from generals who have not even signed up to them saying that one side of the argument is right and the other side of it is wrong?

Matthew Hancock: The debate over how this would operate took place during the passage of the European Union Referendum Bill, which my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe took through Parliament. During the passage of that Bill, there was quite a debate, for example, about how purdah should operate, and many concessions were made by the Government in order to ensure that the process is fair. The result of that was an Act that included the requirement for the Government...
to take a view and then to be able to set out information on various aspects of the referendum, and that is exactly what we are doing.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I think I heard the Minister say that dissenting Ministers will not be allowed to see papers making the case for Britain to remain in the EU, which suggests that the Government have very little confidence in their own arguments. May I put it to my right hon. Friend that it is a constitutional outrage to deny access to arguments that “may”—as the briefing paper says—have a bearing on the referendum to some key Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Justice who are intimately involved in the central issues of this referendum? The Government really need to think again about that, because otherwise the British people will think that the Government intend to rig the referendum.

Matthew Hancock: I would argue the contrary. The constitutional difficulty would arise if civil servants were being asked to support a position that was not the position of the Government. The civil service is there to support the Government. I would argue that this is precisely in order to stick to the constitution, as set out by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 but as carried out in practice for decades and decades before that. The job of the civil service is to support the Government, and that is what it should do.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The British public could be forgiven for thinking that, if someone such as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is not permitted to see all the relevant documents, he may be unable to advise the Government. The Government may then come to a fixed opinion on a particular view such as benefits without having all the facts. A question and answer document from the Cabinet Office says: “Can dissenting Ministers see Department papers on matters that aren’t directly about the Referendum, but may have a bearing.” The answer is: “They can see or commission any papers produced by their Departments in the normal way except those that have a bearing on the referendum question or are intended to be used in support of their position.” It is not a simple black and white matter; it is a matter of interpretation. Special advisers are being handcuffed and told that they must keep things from the Secretary of State. That is appalling. Are the Government afraid that the facts might change the minds of the public and some Cabinet members?

Matthew Hancock: My hon. Friend’s question was focused on what the public think. I believe they will think, “Please can we get on to debating the substance of the question rather than the process of how to make sure that Ministers are allowed, unusually, to depart from the Government position while the constitutional position of the civil service remains in place.”

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Is it true, as reported in The Times this morning, that without the consent or knowledge of the Secretary of State, officials of the DWP carried out research on the instructions of No. 10 to help support the case for remaining in the EU? If that is the case, will the Minister please explain how the Secretary of State can be expected to be responsible for the work of his own Department?

Matthew Hancock: These guidelines are restricted to the issues of the question of in/out. It is perfectly normal—it happens all the time—for there to be communications between Departments and No. 10. That is how the Government operate.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Perhaps the solution is for Ministers to submit freedom of information requests to their own Departments to get the answers. A key part of the Prime Minister’s reform package was very complex changes to benefits and indexing of benefits. If, at the next DWP Question Time, I ask the Secretary of State what progress he is making to determine whether those reforms are deliverable by 23 June, will he be able to give me an honest and full answer?

Matthew Hancock: Yes, of course he will. On issues that are not about the in/out referendum question, Ministers will be fully informed. That is the position. As to the question of whether this will change people’s minds, the Government have made their position clear, which is that, obviously, we are in favour of remain.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Say for a moment that I am the fisheries Minister, young, ambitious, good looking and anxious to do the Prime Minister’s bidding, and the Prime Minister tells me that I have to set out my vision of what life outside the EU means for fishing—indeed that is a huge question for our fishing fleets—what do I do? The EU determines everything in my Department. I have no national policy on fishing, but I happen to be in favour of the out campaign. Do I go home for four months? Do I get no advice from Ministers? Is it not so much “Yes, Minister” as just “Go home for four months and we will see you in June?”

Matthew Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, which is that the rules set out last week make it clear that on all issues, including EU issues other than the in/out question, government continues as normal. I am afraid that he cannot have four months off, even in the circumstances he describes. I am sure that he would not miss the next four months for the world.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Paymaster General is a Minister in the Cabinet Office, which is the Department responsible for the civil service, yet my right hon. Friend has form when it comes to civil service advice. In June 2015, he signed a special declaration overriding civil service advice that further money should not be given to Kids Company, which subsequently disappeared. Would it be open to Ministers of the Crown to use that same special declaration to override this present civil service edict?

Matthew Hancock: Making what is called a direction, such as that which I made on Kids Company because I thought that it was worth spending the money to look after those kids—it is right that Ministers should be able democratically to override the advice of civil servants when they choose to, so long as that is published—is
Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Would a reasonable and fair-minded person not conclude that having been rebuffed in their attempts last September to alter on a sui generis basis the purdah rules relating to the referendum, the Government have come back and undermined the sovereignty of this House by using the civil service to achieve the very same objective?

Matthew Hancock: No, on the contrary. This guidance is a precise consequence of the Prime Minister’s decision to allow Ministers to campaign to leave. If the Prime Minister had not decided to allow Ministers to remain in the Government but to campaign to leave the European Union against the recommendation of the Government, such rules would not be necessary and we would not have had to publish them. This is a direct consequence of the Prime Minister’s decision to allow that debate to take place and to allow Ministers to take one or other side of the debate.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Talking of guidance, my association was this morning issued with guidance from our north of England field director stating:

“The Party is neutral, which means that as an organisation we are not getting involved in any way on an official basis. In practice this means that Associations must not use any resources available to them, including money, data, premises etc. to promote a particular view.”

Given that this is a Conservative Government from the Prime Minister all the way down to us lowly Back Benchers, who are all members of a party that has no official view on the matter, why should civil servants who work for Conservative Ministers take a view on it? That is leading people out there to conclude that there is stitch-up to try and keep us in the wasteful EU.

Matthew Hancock: I do not think that is right. This House passed the European Union Referendum Act 2015, which required the Government to take a view and therefore the civil service follows the Government view. The Conservative party, as my hon. Friend says, is neutral on this matter, but the Government are not. That is a matter for how the party machine acts, rather than how the Government act, because as I have said many times, the civil service is duty bound by tradition and by law to follow the position of the Government of the day. That is why the guidance is constructed thus.
**Points of Order**

5.1 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During the exchanges that we have just had, it was noted that the Minister did not refer to the question and answer brief that has been circulated by the Cabinet Office to civil servants, which carries some of the wider interpretation of the letter. I wonder how I can draw the House’s attention to the fact that we will be publishing it on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee website later today or tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: As I think the hon. Gentleman knows—I say this in response to his spurious point of order—he has achieved his objective. He should consider the matter so advertised.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure there is a “further” to that point of order, but I will hear it first and then come to a view about it.

Mrs Main: I read out the self-same question and answer, which uses the words “may have a bearing”. At what point may we have an explanation of what “may have a bearing” means? Who will arbitrate on that?

Mr Speaker: That is a matter for the Government. Legendarily, the Minister for the Cabinet Office is always keen to address the House—indeed, in the past he has likened himself to Disraeli, who had a notable enthusiasm for addressing the House. If he wishes to respond to the hon. Lady with that legendary succinctness for which he is renowned, we are happy to hear from him, but he is not under any obligation to do so.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I think I answered that point. The question is how we make sure that the guidance means that civil servants follow the Government position, including on the in/out question, which is the only question on which Ministers can move from the Government position. So it is a question of whether something is an in/out question or is normal EU business. I think I set that out earlier; I might have said the same.

Mrs Main: indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: We are extremely grateful to the Minister. I am not sure, from the head movements of the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), that he has satisfied her, but I am not sure any Minister would have been able to do so. None the less, the Minister has graciously come to the Dispatch Box.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come back to Members who are expectant—[Interruption.] Well, expectant of the opportunity to raise points of order, I should perhaps say. But perhaps I may be permitted to take other points of order first. We will come to those illustrious denizens ere long.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning the Secretary of State for Wales—I have made his office aware of my intention to raise this point of order—announced major changes to the timetable and content of the proposed Wales Bill; he has decided to jackknife the Bill and skid it to an undignified halt. Instead of coming to the House to inform right hon. and hon. Members and answer their questions about how he will proceed, he choose to make that significant announcement in front of a gathering of journalists in Cardiff, even suggesting on Twitter that hon. Members can wait until Thursday to question him. Did he give you any indication that he would be announcing this major change of policy today, Mr Speaker, and has he indicated that he will be making an oral statement to the House, as per paragraph 9.1 of the ministerial code?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. The answer is that I have had no advance notice of this matter. It would be only fair for me, from the Chair, to say at this stage that whether it amounts to what she has described as a major change of policy or is merely a temporary pause or tactical judgment, I do not know. Suffice it to say that if there is a change of policy or a significant change in Government intentions for a notable period, the House would expect properly to be informed of that, and there are means by which Ministers can inform the House: either through the device of an answer to a written question or by a written ministerial statement. To my knowledge, neither has thus far been forthcoming. The hon. Lady’s point of order and my response to it will shortly be heard by the Wales Office, and I hope that proper account will be taken of it. If the hon. Lady needs to return to the point, doubtless she will do so.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your assistance in relation to a matter that is of some concern to me. In December I asked, by means of a written question, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer had last met the Financial Conduct Authority to discuss certain matters. The response advised me that Treasury Ministers meet a wide variety of organisations and referred me to the Treasury’s transparency reports online, stating that that is where details of such meetings are published. The reports detailed no bilateral meetings between the Treasury and the FCA over a two-year period.

I therefore challenged the Economic Secretary to the Treasury—she is aware that I am raising this matter today—on that point during a Back-Bench business debate on 12 January. She did not address the matter in her response, so I raised it with her again in a Back-Bench business debate on 1 February. To my great surprise, the hon. Lady stated:

“Contrary to what the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire seems to think,”—[Official Report, 1 February 2016; Vol. 605, c. 748.]—she had met the acting chief executive of the FCA, and that she regretted that I had formed a different opinion.

Of course, my opinion was formed on the basis of a written answer, the Treasury’s own transparency reports and exchanges with the Minister in this Chamber, all of which I should have been entitled to rely upon. It is worth noting that a similar issue has arisen in relation to another question, with the Under-Secretary of State
for Disabled People referring me to a non-existent or impossible to locate piece of information on the Department for Work and Pensions website.

The record therefore suggests that I have misunderstood or am mistaken, but neither is true. I would be very much obliged for your advice, Mr Speaker, on how to put the record straight on this matter. Finally, I would be most grateful if you could advise me on how best to stop Ministers referring Members to websites that do not contain relevant information.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, the thrust of which she was kind enough to give me advance notice. I think that I am right in saying that she also gave notice to the Minister concerned.

Kirsten Oswald indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that confirmation. The short answer to the hon. Lady—this is for the benefit of the House—is that answers to Members’ questions should be direct, substantive and candid. I have sympathy with the view, which she has expressed, that it is not helpful if Government Departments simply refer right hon. and hon. Members in written answers to websites on which the information requested may be located but cannot easily be found. The much more straightforward process, which I think the public would expect, would be to provide an answer to the question. It is not really all that complicated.

That said, I have to emphasise, of course, that the content of written answers, and indeed of ministerial statements in the House, has to be a matter for the judgment of individual Ministers; it is not for the Chair to determine. However, I am offering an overall sentiment, which I think would be expected, would be to provide an answer to the question. It is not really all that complicated.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My point of order relates not to the ministerial code but to the conduct of the House of Commons. When Ministers come to the House of Commons, they are required to give full and informed answers to the questions we ask as Members of Parliament. Having given the matter some thought, can you give us some guidance on how we will know whether Ministers have been fully informed, if we know that there is a process of purposely withholding information from those who may be required to give answers to the House of Commons? How can we then carry out our duty of scrutiny properly?

Mr Speaker: I fear that it would be hazardous for me to tread on the terrain of what might be called the “known unknowns” or even the “unknown unknowns”. That would be difficult. The question, though a very good and legitimate one, is, I fear, at this stage hypothetical, but it is a problematic matter. The best I can say to the right hon. Gentleman is that the Chair, of course, will keenly attend to events and to the process of question and answer, and we will have to look at this matter as and when it arises, on a case by case basis. I will not be looking at it proactively, but if Members raise the matter with the Chair, the Chair will do his best to respond.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have already expressed my admiration for my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who is on the Front Bench. I wonder whether there is any mechanism to reward someone who, first, is thrown into the lion’s den and, secondly, has to defend the indefensible.

Mr Speaker: I think I will treat that as what it is: not a point of order, but an inventive rhetorical question. At any rate, the hon. Gentleman seems justly satisfied, so I think we will, for now, leave it there. We are deeply grateful to the Minister for coming into the Chamber and responding to our inquiries.

If there are no further points of order, and the appetite has been satisfied, at any rate for today, we now come to the motion on the draft European Union Referendum (Date of Referendum etc.) Regulations 2016. Just before I ask the Minister—my illustrious neighbour, the Member for Aylesbury—to move the motion, I should inform the House that I have now considered the instrument, and I have decided not to certify it under Standing Order No. 83P.
Referendums

5.12 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): I beg to move.

That the draft European Union Referendum (Date of Referendum etc.) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 22 February, be approved.

The statutory instrument before us does a simple, but critical job: it puts in place the necessary legislation to enable a referendum to be held on 23 June this year. It is the last piece of legislation that will be debated in this Chamber to make that vote possible. As such, it represents Parliament taking the final steps towards an historic moment when, for the first time in over 40 years, the British people will be given their say on the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Union.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced a few days ago his intention to hold the referendum on 23 June, and the Government believe that that strikes an appropriate balance, giving plenty of time for a vigorous and comprehensive debate. Ultimately, however, the date is a matter for Parliament to decide, and as set out in the European Union Referendum Act 2015, it is a decision that must be approved both here and in the House of Lords.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I am fascinated by my right hon. Friend’s reference to vigorous and open debate, because it is quite clear from the preceding urgent question and from many other matters that have come to light recently that the one thing that everybody needs—information—is the one thing that people are going to find themselves deprived of. If the voters do not have balanced, impartial and accurate information, what are they supposed to do?

Mr Lidington: My advice to any elector would be to look at what the Government are saying and advising, but also at what the various campaign groups and other organisations in this country are saying. I will come later to the designation of campaign organisations. We need this statutory instrument to be approved, among other things, to make it possible for the Electoral Commission to go ahead and designate the campaign groups on each side of the argument, and give them access to the privileges that come with that status, precisely so that they can go out and present their case and make information and argument available to the people to whom my hon. Friend refers.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am very happy to have an early referendum, but did the Government decide not to push back on the absolutely pathetic non-offer we were made because they did not think we were ever going to get anything worth having out of the EU?

Mr Lidington: On the contrary, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister secured a deal that has brought some significant reforms to the European Union. I would advise my right hon. Friend to look at the reaction in many European capitals, in the media across Europe, and in the European Parliament, which has very largely been one of considerable surprise at the degree to which the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom was able to secure reforms. In some cases, that commentary involved a fair measure of criticism of other Government leaders for conceding what was believed to be too much.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I will give way to the hon. Lady and then I must ask the House to allow me to make some progress.

Kate Hoey: I would be very happy to have a referendum as I have wanted one for years, but why did the Prime Minister ignore the views expressed in the letter from the leaders of the three Assemblies and Parliaments in the United Kingdom? Did that not show huge disrespect?

Mr Lidington: First, the letter was not ignored, and we certainly took account of the views of the devolved Administrations even though we decided in the end to disagree with their recommendation. I want to come to that point at a later stage in my remarks.

The date is just one element of the order, but clearly the most important, because the remaining elements largely flow from it. I will therefore explain the Government’s thinking on the date and then turn to the rest of the order. There must be enough time for a full, serious and considered debate that allows all the issues to have a full airing, and the campaigners must have enough time to put their case to the British people. On the other hand, although this may grieve some hon. Members, the campaign cannot continue indefinitely. The vote should be timely, while the issues are live and the details fresh—and we should also be wary of testing the public’s patience. Several prominent campaign groups are already active on both sides. Following the Prime Minister’s announcement on the outcome of the renegotiation, the debate on the referendum question will now begin in earnest and is already starting to gather real momentum.

The Government selected 23 June because we needed enough time for a proper airing of the issues, and we thought that any sooner would risk curtailing that debate, but to go any later would test the patience of the British people. School holidays in Scotland begin on 24 June, and from then people will be travelling and enjoying their summer. Later than 23 June would mean, in essence, waiting until after the summer holiday period had concluded in all parts of the United Kingdom and in Gibraltar. Frankly, I think that the British people would have found it very difficult to understand if we had asked them to wait seven or eight months after the conclusion of the renegotiation before they could have their say.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I have previously raised with my right hon. Friend the fact that a European Council meeting is also scheduled to take place on 23 June. What can we do to ensure that, if the leave campaign looks to be gaining momentum at a late stage, that will not be used to pretend that there are things on the meeting’s agenda to try to change people’s opinions, or that things will not be leaked in advance of that meeting to try to give people the impression that the Government have agreed a better deal than is actually the case?
Mr Lidington: I think my hon. Friend needs to study more carefully the words both of the document published at the end of the renegotiation and of a number of other European leaders. They could not have made it clearer, first, that they were not interested in a hypothetical further renegotiation in the event of a vote to leave, and secondly, that the very important safeguards that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister secured during the renegotiation would lapse automatically in the event of such a vote. That is written into the document itself.

In practical terms, holding the vote on 23 June means 18 weeks between announcing the deal and the vote, and a full 10 weeks’ regulated referendum campaign period, with six weeks for the designation of lead campaigners, thus meeting the Electoral Commission recommendations. We envisage that the designation process will be commenced on 4 March and that the Electoral Commission will have to designate the two umbrella campaign groups by 14 April at the latest. The Electoral Commission supports the Government’s approach to the timing of the referendum. Last week it published its assessment of readiness and said that it was content that the date “does not pose a significant risk to a well-run referendum”.

It is true, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) has said, that there are still some concerns about the date, particularly among Members of the three devolved Administrations and right hon. and hon. Members in this place who represent those three parts of the United Kingdom. In particular, the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) expressed concern during Foreign Office questions about the possible interaction with the elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on 5 May, which is also the date for various local and mayoral elections in different parts of the United Kingdom.

I think that those fears are misplaced, not least because multiple elections are already being held on 5 May. I really do not understand why a referendum that will take place a full seven weeks after the date of the devolved parliamentary and Assembly elections should be regarded as disrespectful. By contrast, I would argue that we are treating voters with respect when we assume that they should be perfectly capable of distinguishing between two different campaigns that will be nearly two months apart.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Minister has just confirmed that the official campaign will launch bang in the middle of the devolved Administrations’ campaigns. It is quite an achievement to get Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionists, the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru and the Labour party in Wales to agree on anything. Why is he not taking seriously the concerns expressed by all those parties?

Mr Lidington: For the reasons I have given, I think that to have left the referendum until autumn, which was the next window available had we ruled out 23 June, would have tested the patience of the British people for the duration of the campaign. The campaign has already got under way. What will start in the period described by the hon. Gentleman is the regulated campaign period, during which special rules on campaign expenditure apply.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Minister take some reassurance from the fact that in the canvassing that I have been doing for Caroline Pidgeon, the Liberal Democrat London mayoral candidate, I have found that voters have no difficulty whatsoever in understanding that there will be elections for the London Mayor and the London Assembly, and that the European referendum will take place a few weeks later?

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman puts the case very well. Others have said that June is simply too soon, and I do not agree. Traditionally, in our history, a general election has been held with only six weeks’ notice. Only since the implementation of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011 under the coalition Government have we moved away from that practice. The referendum has had a much longer gestation period. The intention to hold a referendum before the end of 2017 was announced in the Prime Minister’s Bloomberg speech in January 2013, and it was reaffirmed at the general election last May, and again when the European Union Referendum Act received Royal Assent in December 2015. The intended date was announced four months in advance. The referendum has been a long time coming.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Scottish independence referendum was held in September, and, if anything, the campaign benefited from the fact that people could campaign during the warm summer months with extended daylight hours. What advice does the Minister give to the devolved Administrations, who will no sooner have come out of a pre-election purdah period than they will have to go into a pre-referendum purdah period, just as they start implementing the manifestos they were elected on?

Mr Lidington: Of course, the purdah rules vary depending on the nature of the election concerned. The purdah rules for devolved elections limit what Government agencies can say and do in respect of devolved matters. We are talking about the question whether the United Kingdom should be in or out of the European Union, and that is, without any doubt whatsoever, a reserved competence in respect of all three devolution settlements.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister is trying manfully but, dare I say it, completely unsuccessfully to explain what consideration the Government have given to the strong representations they have had from the elected Governments of 75% of the equal partners in this Union. I appreciate that he does not have time to do so now, but will he undertake to make sure that full details of the Government’s consideration of that letter are placed in the Library of the House as soon as possible after the debate?

Mr Lidington: We took account of that letter. We also took careful account of the specific request from the official foreign affairs spokesman of the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Gordon, during Foreign Office questions on 12 January for an assurance that the date of the referendum would be “at least six weeks after the date of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish elections”.[Official Report, 12 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 683.]
That request made by the right hon. Gentleman—I presume on behalf of his party, for which he was speaking at Foreign Office questions—has been met, and has been met in full.

The Electoral Commission has confirmed that it is content with the Government's proposals and has said that, in its view, arrangements for a well-run referendum are now well advanced. The statutory instrument has been considered by both the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee. Both have considered the statutory instrument, and neither found any cause for concern.

I turn now to the other aspects of the regulations. They are very much in line with the framework set up by the European Union Referendum Act 2015, so I shall be brief. As well as setting the date, the regulations do three things. First, they set the start date for the designation process. That is the process by which the Electoral Commission appoints lead campaigners on one or both sides. We have followed the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and allowed a full six weeks. That will give campaigners a four-week window to finalise and submit their applications, after which the Electoral Commission will have up to two weeks to decide which, if any, applicants to designate as the lead for each side. Let me be absolutely clear, to avoid misunderstanding. The regulations do not tell the Electoral Commission how to make its decision. That decision is entirely impartial, and the test the Electoral Commission must apply when making its decision is set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act, as modified by the European Union Referendum Act. All the regulations do is set the start of the process as 4 March, while the rest of the timetable, finishing on 14 April at the latest, was set by the 2000 Act.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Will the Minister give us some indication of whether the Electoral Commission’s designation process is open to challenge, and if so, of how that challenge would operate?

Mr Lidington: Any executive decision by any public authority might be at risk of judicial review, but criteria for the Electoral Commission are set out in PPERA and they will guide the commission in making its assessment. I am sure that the commission will want to explain its verdict when it is published. There would have to be a pretty overwhelming case for a judicial review application for it to succeed, but such an option is available.

The Electoral Commission’s initial guidance for campaigners on this issue was updated on 5 February, so potential applicants have had plenty of notice. The commission has also now published the application form online. I remind the House that the lead campaigners, once designated, will receive a number of benefits, including a higher spending limit of up to £7 million, a free delivery of mailings to every household or every elector and, assuming that campaigners are designated on both sides, access to a grant of up to £600,000 and access to a broadcast.

The second additional element in the regulations is the referendum period—namely, when full financial and campaigning controls apply and, in particular, when spending limits are imposed on campaigners. The referendum period, as set out in the regulations, is a full 10 weeks and will not overlap with the designation process. That was the approach recommended by the Electoral Commission. The referendum period will, under the regulations, start on 15 April.

Kate Hoey: The Minister may be coming on to this, but will he clarify very clearly and succinctly how this will affect Government spending? I do not mean the Government, but the Cabinet members who support staying in as opposed to those who do not. How will that work for them?

Mr Lidington: The limits on what the Government can do are set out in section 125 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The hon. Lady will recall that that provision was the subject of significant debate when the European Union Referendum Bill was going through its stages in the House. The so-called purdah restrictions remain those set out in the 2000 Act. In addition, in requiring the Government to publish particular items of information, the European Union Referendum Act states that the Government must do so at least 10 weeks before the date of the referendum. Those are the restrictions that she asked me about.

Finally, the regulations set out the periods for reporting donations and loans received by registered campaigners, and set the deadline by which the reports must be submitted to the Electoral Commission. The purpose of those arrangements is to ensure that sources of campaign finance are visible and public before the poll, so ensuring that the campaign is transparent.

The decision before us is a simple one: when should the British people have their say? We believe that 23 June strikes the right balance: it gives time for a substantial campaign, without testing public patience. There is time for campaigners and political parties to make their cases, and for the British people to decide. I commend the regulations to the House.

5.34 pm

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): We seem to have focused on process for so much of today that I hope this will be the last time we do so.

I want to check some of the details of the statutory instrument with the Minister. It sets the date of the referendum on whether the United Kingdom should remain a member of the European Union. It also prescribes the length of the referendum period, the start of the period for applications to become a designated organisation, and the periods for the reporting of donations or regulated transactions. If would be good if the Minister nodded.

Mr Lidington indicated assent.

Pat Glass: The main purpose of the statutory instrument is to set 23 June 2016 as the date of the referendum, which will take place over the whole of the UK and in Gibraltar. It prescribes the referendum period, which will begin on 15 April 2016, and it prescribes 4 March 2016 as the start of the period in which applications can be made to become designated organisations in the referendum. I understand that that poses no problem for the organisations in the remain campaign, but those in the hopelessly splintered out campaign seem to be having a much greater problem. Now is the time for them to get their act together if they are to hit the deadline.
The statutory instrument also sets out periods for the reporting of donations or regulated transactions—for example, loans—by permitted participants who are not registered parties or are minor parties. It sets out the dates on or before which reports must be delivered to the Electoral Commission. Okay so far?

Mr Lidington indicated assent.

Pat Glass: Labour has always said that as soon as the Government’s European negotiations are completed, they should get on with the referendum and end the uncertainty, which is bad for British jobs, growth, investment and working people.

Jonathan Edwards: The shadow Minister will be aware of the letter written by the First Minister of Wales in conjunction with the First Ministers of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Of course, the First Minister of Wales is a Labour party member. He said: “We believe that holding a referendum as early as June will mean that a significant part of the referendum campaign will necessarily run in parallel with those elections and risks confusing issues at a moment when clarity is required.”

Will the shadow Minister support his position tonight in the Lobby when there is a vote on this issue? If the Labour party here abstains or votes with the Government, does it not show that we cannot take a word the First Minister says seriously?

Pat Glass: I will come on to those issues.

Labour agreed with the Electoral Commission that the referendum date should be separate from that when other polls are taking place, and succeeded in pressuring the Government to amend the European Union Referendum Bill to stop the referendum being held on 5 May 2016 so that it did not clash with the other elections on that day. However, we do not agree with the SNP and others that it is in some way disrespectful to hold the referendum on 23 June.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Pat Glass: Just a second.

We believe that the people of the UK are perfectly capable of making an important decision in early May and another important decision in late June, seven weeks later. It is patronising to suggest otherwise.

This country is safer, stronger and more prosperous in Europe and Labour is campaigning to stay in. Our membership of the EU brings jobs, growth and investment. It protects British workers and consumers, and helps to keep us safe.

Patrick Grady: Will the hon. Lady confirm what the shadow Foreign Secretary said the other day, which is that it is the position of the Labour party that if Scotland votes to stay in the European Union and the rest of the UK votes to leave, Labour is quite happy for Scotland to be dragged out of the EU against its will?

Pat Glass: The position of the Labour party is that it is for the people of the UK to make a decision on this, because the people of Scotland had a referendum and chose to stay as part of the UK.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that if we put the date of the referendum back beyond 23 June, it would slip beyond the summer and into the autumn, because many people in Scotland go on holiday earlier than those in the rest of the UK and we will be on our holidays in August? That would prolong the period of uncertainty and all the risks to business investment that go with it.

Pat Glass: I agree entirely. Uncertainty is bad for British jobs and the British economy, and we believe that the longer this goes on, the more damage will be done to our economy and our jobs.

John Redwood: What does the hon. Lady think that EU state aid rules, energy prices, energy intervention and procurement rules have done to our steel jobs? What has the common fisheries policy done to our fishing jobs?

Pat Glass: People will have to make a decision on those issues, but they are not related to this statutory instrument. We accept that this great country would be able to make its way in the world outside the EU, but leaving would cost us dearly in all kinds of ways including jobs, our competitiveness in business, and the safety of our citizens from terrorism, crime, climate change and war. At a time of Russian expansionism and international terrorism from groups such as ISIS-Daesh, we do not believe that it is right to risk our safety and security as a nation. We want the UK to lead, not leave, Europe. We are the second biggest economy in the EU, and many of our partners such as Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and others want to work with us further to reform the EU, and they are looking to the UK to lead on that. Leaving the EU risks future peace in Europe, and Britain’s influence in the world.

In government, Labour passed the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 and we supported the passage of the European Union Referendum Act 2015. We support this statutory instrument, and we will leave it to others to moan about the date of the referendum. We are getting on and putting our energy into winning the referendum and keeping Britain leading in Europe.
agreement will be irreversible is a question of trust, and today we had an extremely important urgent question on information. I put a question to the Minister, and tomorrow my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) will interview the Cabinet Secretary on this matter. The real question is about voter trust. On 23 June, will people have enough proper information, based on a fair arrangement between those on both sides of the debate? The Government first insisted on the purdah arrangements that they wanted to use for the whole of the civil service machinery. We drove them off on that, but then they brought in, through the House of Lords, a legal duty to provide such information—if I may say so, they pretended that that had come from other people in the House of Lords, but it was clearly at least half sponsored by the Government.

When we got to ping-pong, I waited until the last minute before it ended, and I got up and asked the Minister—he knows what is coming—whether he would give me a straight answer, yes or no, about whether the Minister—he knows what is coming—whether he would prove that that is the case. I will explain why in one second.

On 23 June, a most momentous and historic decision will be taken by all the people in the United Kingdom who can vote. They have a right to know whether the question they are going to be asked, on whether to remain or to leave, can be answered. It is the basis of my proposition that it is impossible for them to know whether it is going to be irreversible for a simple reason. Under the international agreement where the European Court may or may not take into account the question that has been posed by the White Paper, certainly there is no guarantee of a treaty change and certainly there is no guarantee that the mechanics of the international law decision will produce a definite result that the European Court can decide on. Nobody can say that the European Court will or will not accept any treaty change. As a matter of fact, with respect to the question of referendums, there is no guarantee that there will not be referendums.

There are currently at least four Governments of the 28 in the EU, in the great stitch-up in the political decision-making process I referred to, who barely have control over their government at all. There are massive problems in Portugal and Spain, and now in Ireland as well, and there are massive problems in Greece. There is absolutely no reason why anybody should guarantee either that there will be treaty change or that it will be irreversible.

I happened to take part in the referendums that produced “no” votes in other countries, including France and Denmark. To say as a matter of absolute certainty in this disgraceful White Paper that it is irreversible when it is impossible as a matter of fact, let alone of law, for anyone to say that they know what the European Court will do or indeed that there will not be a referendum and what the outcome of that would be, is simply unacceptable.

Sir William Cash: Absolutely nothing at all. I think that the British people, who are a great people, are waking up to this. As I said in last Thursday’s debate, Churchill said that we should tell the truth to the British people and they will follow, but they are not being told the truth—that is the real truth, and nothing but the truth.

A comprehensive poll was published in the Evening Standard on Friday on the question of whether the voters trust the outcome of this negotiation. The result is simple to describe: 53% said that they did not trust it at all; only 22% said that they did; as for the balance, the pollsters said that half of those who were undecided tended not to trust it. I know that a poll is a poll, but I also say that on the question of trust, the outcome is either to be trusted or not to be trusted. This whole negotiated package, whether it be looked at from a political or a legal point of view, is not to be trusted. I say that to the House of Commons because this is where the real issues have to be resolved, but we have quite rightly handed this over to the voters—and they
do not trust it. I do not think that anything they will have heard today from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, or anything they will hear tomorrow from the Cabinet Secretary, or indeed any of the matters discussed in relation to the component parts of this package, either in aggregate or individually, will provide any reason for anybody to trust this deal.

The question before us today about the date of 23 June must be weighed against the background of whether that date is appropriate. I want to listen to what SNP Members say, as I have a great interest in that. They are elected to stand up for their own views and for their own part of the United Kingdom. I may disagree with what they say, but I saw what happened with the Scottish referendum, particularly regarding the date and the length of time allowed for debate. We will hear from SNP Members how they were stitched up by the BBC and all the rest of it. What I am saying is that this entire question of the date is dependent on the extent to which proper information is given to the voter. As I said in the urgent question earlier, the crucial issue is what reliance the voters can have on the fact that the information they are being given is transparent and honest, and additionally impartial and accurate, which is what the Minister for Europe told me on the Floor of the House it would be.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I rise with some trepidation in recognition that my hon. Friend is an expert in this field. I do not think he will agree with me, but this is my take. For most people, this will be a vote on the principle of whether to remain or to leave rather than on the minutiae of the detail of the renegotiation. That was always going to be the case, in my view, irrespective of when the referendum is held. Given that he has argued so cogently for so long that a referendum should be held on this issue, I am inclined to agree with our Front-Bench team that it should be held as quickly as possible and that a date after the Scottish and Welsh elections seems to be the right time. Otherwise, it falls to the autumn.

Sir William Cash: What I would say in reply is very simple. If my hon. Friend were good enough to read the speech and the remarks made by my good right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary on the question of the whole package, he would realise that our right hon. Friend says that we do not want to look at anything other than the whole package. That is what he says; my hon. Friend should read it for himself. It is very strange that we are going to such lengths, with the Prime Minister roaming around the country making all these speeches, with the putting out of all this information, with all this business about the civil service and the guidance, and with all the rest of matters that I have referred to. Why is so much emphasis being placed on this? Why are the airwaves being dominated on such a scale and why is so much paper being used?

This reminds me of what I said to the late Baroness Thatcher when I was invited to lunch in Downing Street. When I went into the room, most of the Cabinet were sitting around the table. She said, “Bill, you sit next to me.” Then she turned to Geoffrey Howe and said, “I’ve brought Bill in to talk about Europe.” Then she turned to me and said, “What do you feel about Europe, Bill?” I said, while looking at Geoffrey Howe, “Prime Minister, I think your task is more difficult than Churchill’s.” She said, “You will have to explain this, won’t you?” I said, “Prime Minister, Churchill’s task was more difficult than yours for this reason. You are in greater difficulty than he because he was faced with invasion, but you are faced with pieces of paper.” It is those pieces of paper that I am worried about, and I think the voters should be as well.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), and I will address some of the points he raised.

Let me first make it clear—it seems appropriate to do so in this place—that the Scottish National party position has not changed. Our position remains consistent in that we are still against the 23 June referendum date. I say to the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) that our position has remained unchanged despite what the Conservatives have said on this issue.

My first point is about the important issue of respect. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) mentioned the Labour First Minister of Wales, who wrote a letter along with the First Ministers of Scotland and Northern Ireland. The right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) and his colleagues also raised the issue of the date. The point was that this campaign period will overlap with the May election campaign, and this was raised not only by the three First Ministers, but by Jenny Watson, the chair of the Electoral Commission, who said:

“Referendum campaign periods overlap with May election campaign periods if the referendum period is held on any date in June.”

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) also made this point very clear. If the Minister were to speak to whoever takes the Prime Minister’s mail, he will find out about a letter of correction from my right hon. Friend who was misrepresented by the Minister for Europe and by a number of the Minister’s colleagues. Many of them signed my early-day motion 1042. It was signed by Members of all parties, including Conservative Members, given the respect agenda on this issue. There is a respect agenda—there is the idea that democracy does not begin and end in this place. We have incredibly important elections coming up in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and English local authorities, which is a point that we have made consistently. It is one of the reasons why we will vote against the motion today.

Before I discuss some of the other issues associated with the date, let me deal with some of the practical questions. Will the Minister tell us what significant changes have been made in the statutory instrument as a result of his consultations with the devolved Administrations, and will he make his correspondence available in the House of Commons Library? That is a very simple question, which was asked earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). Perhaps the Minister will make a note of it.

We see problems throughout this instrument. It states that the referendum period begins on 15 April 2016, three weeks before the devolved elections. It also states that the referendum period ends on 21 April 2016, and the report is supposed to be sent to the Electoral Commission on 28 April, one week before those crucial devolved elections. When the Minister answers our question
about what practical changes have been made in the SI as a result of his correspondence, will he also tell us what impact the purdah rules will have on any programme for government that might need to be agreed? Under the Scotland Act, it could be up to 28 days before the appointment of a new First Minister is agreed to, and I think that broadly similar arrangements apply to First Ministers in Wales and Northern Ireland. The referendum campaign eats into that period quite significantly.

I refer the Minister to paragraph 7.11 of the explanatory memorandum, which states:

“It is for the Devolved Administrations to consider any restrictions on their own referendum-related activity”.

Given that the Minister wrote that, can he tell us what correspondence he has had with the devolved Administrations about it, about the formation of new Governments, and about what impact this could have on the publication of a programme for government? As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), there are European Union issues that will have a significant impact on that programme, including agriculture and fisheries. Let us not forget that it was the United Kingdom Government who described our fishing industry as expendable, not the European Union. What will happen to those and other issues that are affected by European Union legislation?

Sir William Cash: As a veteran of the Scotland Acts, all the way back to when Mr Dewar was Secretary of State at—I believe—the beginning of 1979, may I ask whether the hon. Gentleman recalls the reserve powers? Would they not be an issue?

Stephen Gethins: As usual, the hon. Gentleman has made a very good point. European Union legislation has a significant impact on significant powers that sit with the Scottish Parliament, and the same applies to Northern Ireland and Wales. I have mentioned some already, but energy is another example. On renewables, for instance, the Scottish Government are much more in line with our European partners than with the United Kingdom Government.

Let me now address issues that the hon. Member for Stone raised in what was—a very informed speech. I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon has come into the Chamber, because this is a good time to remind the House that he called the independence referendum 545 days before the day on which it took place. I shall give the Minister some leeway by saying that SNP Members are not seeking quite that number of days. However, we need to have the courage of our convictions, and have a proper debate.

The hon. Gentleman and I will not agree on this particular referendum. Indeed, I am not sure that we will agree on many referendums that may be held during my time in the House. One thing on which we will agree, however, is that a proper debate takes a great deal longer than the seven weeks that we have been given, and we want a proper debate that goes to the heart of this issue. As someone who wants Scotland, and the rest of the United Kingdom, to remain part of the European Union, I believe that our case stands up to scrutiny, and that the Conservatives should have the courage of their convictions and subject it to appropriate scrutiny.

Sir William Cash: Whether or not we agree on the immigration issue, does the hon. Gentleman agree with what I said on 3 February? As everyone knows from the recent figures, the question of immigration—which is actually about numbers and the effect on social services, including those in Scotland—has now been whittled down to a narrow argument about in-work benefits, on which the Government want to go on harping so that they can distract attention from the really big question, which is “Who governs this country, and are we going to be in the second tier of a two-tier German Europe?”

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman was clearly listening to Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, when she raised that very point about in-work migrant benefits this morning. I believe that people who are going to live and work in a country, and contribute, have every right to the same benefits, just as 2 million United Kingdom citizens, including 1 million in Spain, benefit from being part of the European Union.

Nicola Sturgeon made what I thought was a very valid point. When we were “whittling down” the debate, as the hon. Gentleman put it, to a discussion of the rather minor issue of in-work migrant benefits at the European Council, time was taken from a discussion of the refugee crisis, in regard to which, incidentally, Ireland was giving way on its opt-out. The hon. Gentleman will not agree with me about this, but I think that that had a great deal more to do with the Minister trying—unsuccessfully, as I can see—to keep his Back Benchers happy than with anything to do with the broader debate on our membership of the European Union.

Bob Stewart: I am listening carefully to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I am intrigued to know when the SNP and the other parties would like the referendum to be held. I assume that it will not be in 543 days.

Stephen Gethins: As a number of us have said, mid-September is often a good time for a referendum. It gives us the summer days to campaign and engage, and the longer nights to chap on people’s doors. It is to be hoped that people will also form their own groups in an organic way. Mid-September is probably a good time, but we would certainly not opt for 23 June.

Let us give this a little bit of time. I urge all Members to listen to the social democratic case—as someone described it earlier—that was put by the First Minister this morning not so far from here, at St John’s Smith Square. Let us look at what membership of the European Union does. The United Kingdom could stand on its own two feet and be successful as an independent member state outside the European Union. We absolutely reject the “Project Fear” scare tactics: they do nothing for the case for staying in, and nothing for the case for going out. I hope that we will all bear in mind the 20-point lead that the no campaign squandered in Scotland, not just because of the positive case that we put, but also, to an extent, because of the fear tactics that those campaigners used. I hope that the Conservatives will learn the lessons of that referendum.

Kate Hoey: I am sorry; I am not a Minister yet.

I know that the hon. Gentleman and I are on different sides, but I agree with him that this should be a positive campaign. May I return him to the issue of what I
consider to be the hugely important letter that was signed by the First Ministers of the three home countries, all of whom had different views on the European Union? Does it not shame the Government that they showed so little respect—for respect is the word—by simply throwing that letter away and implying that it meant absolutely nothing?

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Lady and I will find ourselves on different sides, by way of a respectful debate. She has made a very valid point. The issue was raised by three First Ministers, including the Labour First Minister of Wales, and was agreed on by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, who, as we all know, do not necessarily agree on everything, but managed to come together on this particular issue.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Gentleman is making a very intelligent speech. He mentioned “Project Fear”. Did he happen to catch “Newsnight” on Friday, when there was an analysis of “Project Fear”? John McTernan, a Labour strategist in Scotland, said that it was all about ramping up the risk. That is exactly the sort of campaign that we do not want to risk. I am afraid that a campaign based on that premise will fail.

Stephen Gethins: I hope that, given his track record, Mr McTernan will not be on our side during the European referendum campaign, because otherwise we could be in serious difficulties.

The hon. Gentleman has made a good point about “Project Fear”. Let us hear a positive case about the economic and social benefits, and about the benefits of an arrangement whereby independent member states agree on a common set of rules. I hope that the Minister will give us a few more pointers. I have already set him a few questions. Here is another: will there be a special arrangement whereby independent member states agree on a common set of rules? I hope that the Minister will not advocate this—will the Government abandon recess, or, if the Minister thinks that he will lose—we have to acknowledge that it is taking place on both sides of the House—will he not advocate this will the Government abandon Prime Minister’s Question Time at the last minute in order to rush off and campaign?

Sir William Cash: In relation to “Project Fear”, which is very real, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should listen to Mervyn King, the former Governor of the Bank of England, who said that it was the euro and Europe that were causing massive unemployment and making Europe so dysfunctional? In fact, the dangers to the UK and to Scotland are also dangers to Europe as a whole. We have only to look at the way in which the Germans treated the Greeks, not to mention opening the doors to immigration, causing dislocation and more barbed wire in Europe today then there was even during the cold war.

Stephen Gethins: When we talk about “Project Fear”, we have to acknowledge that it is taking place on both sides of the debate. There has been a positive debate on the environmental benefits of membership; when Germany was experiencing acid rain as a result of UK industry, for example, we had to formulate a common set of rules. Let us also think about the benefits to the economy when people go on holiday. Also, the benefits to Scotland’s small and medium-sized enterprises of exporting to Europe are worth £2,000 to every man, woman and child in Scotland.

I say to the hon. Member for Stone that I want to have a positive debate, including with him, and I am sure that we will do so over the next little while. Let us not mistake the faults of the European Union for the faults of the member states. This is a mistake that we know only too well in Scotland. Let us have a positive debate, but let us have an honest debate as well.

6.11 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I welcome a fairly early date for the referendum. I do not know about you, Mr Speaker, but there is only so much that I can take of all the stories of the pestilence, famine and plague that are going to be visited upon us by the very European Union countries that the Government say we love and work well with. The Government have this strange vision that those countries would suddenly change and become extremely unpleasant were we to want a relationship based on friendship and trade rather than on the current treaties. I personally think that 16 weeks would be quite enough to do the job that I would love the Government to do, which is to win it for the leave campaign by using this highly inappropriate tone and by constantly slanging off our European partners by telling us just how unpleasant they would be. I would have thought that a Government wishing to encourage us to stay in the European Union would want to be rather more obliging about our European partners and to paint a picture of how things might be better were we to stay in, rather than concentrating only on ascribing false futures to the leave campaign.

I am interjecting in this debate because I am worried that 16 weeks might not be long enough for the Government to carry out all the tasks necessary to fulfil the requirements of the legislation. In particular, I have been moved to that view by listening to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who is often absolutely right about these points and their salience. The Government have an important duty to provide impartial information to the public as part of the task of preparing them for the referendum. Having seen their work so far, I am afraid to say that it fails by all standards. It is not impartial, it is not well researched and it is often exceedingly misleading. I am using parliamentary language, Mr Speaker. I might use richer language were I not inside the House. It seems to me that the Government are going to need a lot more time to work with their ever-willing officials to come up with balanced, mature and sensible information about what the future might look like under either scenario.

One thing that the Government have clearly had no time to prepare so far—this is a particularly worrying lacuna—is information on what the future might look like if we stay in. We have had no response from the Government on how they would respond to “The Five Presidents’ Report: Completing Europe’s Economic and Monetary Union” or on how they would handle demands for capital markets union, banking union, full economic and monetary union and political union. Would such a situation immediately trigger a requirement for us to veto the next treaty, would we seek a comprehensive opt-out from it, or would the Government want to work with their partners and agree to some modest treaty changes that would affect the United Kingdom, in the spirit of “The Five Presidents’ Report”? Any such changes would be triggered by about 2017, so probably within this Parliament. Could we then look forward to a second referendum if we stayed in the European Union?
Under the European Union Referendum Act 2015, there would need to be a referendum on any treaty changes made as a consequence of “The Five Presidents’ Report” and the clear desire of our partners to go along the route to political union.

Sir William Cash: Has my right hon. Friend had the opportunity to see not only the White Paper that was produced a few days ago but the latest jewel in the crown from the Government, which is entitled “The process for withdrawing from the European Union”? It contains page after page of tendentious remarks, assertions and assumptions that cannot be substantiated. I can see the Minister for Europe wriggling around a bit on the Front Bench, because the bottom line is that he will not be able to answer these questions, but they will be tested before 23 June.

John Redwood: That is why, in my amiable way, I was suggesting that the Government might like to rethink their position on the timing of the referendum. Having seen that piece of work, I agree with my hon. Friend. Frankly, I was frankly ashamed that such a document could come from the United Kingdom Government. It bore no relation to what the leave campaigns are saying about how we would like the Government to handle the British people’s decision if they decided to leave. It did not give any credence to the idea that we would be negotiating with friends and allies who would have as much interest in a successful British exit as we would, should that be the will of the British people.

Ministers never seem to understand that the rest of Europe has far more exports to us at risk than we have to the rest of the European Union, because we are in massive deficit with those countries. I have had personal assurances from representatives of the German Government, for example, that they have no wish to see tariffs or barriers being placed in the way of their extremely profitable and successful trade with the United Kingdom. To issue a document implying that all sorts of obstacles would be put in the way of such trade over a 10-year period simply beggars belief.

Sir William Cash: May I give my right hon. Friend an example? These documents contain scarcely any serious objective analysis from bodies such as the Office for National Statistics or the House of Commons Library, and their arguments are tendentious. I am sure he will remember, because this is at the forefront of his mind, that in current account transactions relating to imports, exports, goods and services, we run a deficit with the other 27 member states of about £58 billion a year, and that Germany runs a surplus in those same goods, services, imports and exports. If that is a single market, I am a Dutchman.

John Redwood: I am sure that my hon. Friend is many fine things, but a Dutchman is clearly not one of them. He has, however, revealed an important fact, and it is the kind of fact that we would expect to see in a balanced document setting out the position on trade. I hope that the Minister will leave enough time in his urgent timetable to ensure that those sorts of important facts be put before the British people. Indeed, the Minister would be wise to do that from his own point of view—perhaps I should not help him as much as I am apparently trying to do. The Government have been rumbled on this. The press and a lot of the public are saying that they want factual, mature and sensible information setting out the risks of staying in, the risks of leaving and what it would look like in either case, but that is not what we are getting.

We have had another example in the past few days. We have been witnessing a long-term decline of the pound against the dollar for many months, because we are living through a period of dollar strength. In the past few days, when Brexit was in the news, we were told that the pound was going down because of fears about Brexit, whereas that was clearly not the case on other days when the pound had been going down. However, on those same days, the Government bond market had been going up. The prices of bonds had been rising and our creditworthiness was assessed as being better, but I did not hear the Government saying that the idea of Brexit was raising Britain’s credit standing. We could make that case just as easily as we could make the case that the fear of Brexit was leading to a fall in the pound.

That is the kind of tendentious information that I hope the Minister will reconsider if he wishes to keep up the normally high standards of Government documentation and use impartial civil service advice in the right tradition, which we in the House of Commons would like to see. I can see that a few colleagues are not entirely persuaded that those high standards are always met, but I shall give the Government the benefit of the doubt. I have certainly seen many Government documents that achieve higher standards than the ones on this matter.

I again urge the Minister to make sure that he leaves enough time in the action-packed timetable to produce high-quality, balanced information that includes the risks of staying in and the wild ride to political union that others have in mind, as well as what he sees as the risks of leaving. For instance, the Government should point out that if we stop paying the £10 billion of net contributions—money we do not get back—that will immediately improve the balance of payments by one fifth next year. Would that not be a marvellous advantage? I do not see it being pointed out in any of the current material in order to show some kind of balance.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a hugely powerful argument. The answer is quite simple: the Government do not want the facts in there—they do not want the British public to know. The British public will come to that conclusion, and it is not a good conclusion if we are to have a balanced debate on the referendum.

John Redwood: I fear that is right, but I also fear I am beginning to give the Government too much help. Obviously, I would like them to lose on this occasion, because I think we will be much better off if that happens. I will therefore vote with the Government, because 16 weeks is quite enough of “Project Fear” and of people misrepresenting a whole lot of things that are going on by saying, “These are the results of the fears of Brexit.” That will do the job I would like the Government to do and help the case I am trying to make, but the Government have a long way to go in the interests of good government and in meeting the legal requirements
that they have placed on themselves to provide impartial information. I just trust that in the next few weeks they can lift their game.

6.21 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Liberal Democrats will support this statutory instrument, which, as the Minister says, puts in place legislation for the referendum on 23 June. He will know that the coalition legislated so that any treaty change would trigger a referendum, but, as we know, his party won the election on the basis of a manifesto commitment to offer a referendum independent of any treaty change, and so we are where we are now.

Sir William Cash: Is the right hon. Gentleman thinking that the European Union Act 2011, which many of us opposed for all sorts of reasons, should be severely amended and/or repealed with regard to treaty change?

Tom Brake: We have a referendum ahead of us, and I suggest we get on with that before looking at whether to make any changes to that Act.

The Liberal Democrats support the referendum on 23 June. I have been in this House for some time now—longer than some Members but not as long as others—and it seems to me that, in this House and beyond, we have had a very full debate in recent general elections about the EU and whether we should or should not be members of it. As I said in an earlier intervention on the Minister, there is certainly no confusion in the minds of the electors in my constituency between the mayoral and Assembly elections taking place in May, and the EU referendum that will take place, presumably on 23 June. Clearly, it is more difficult for the political parties and the campaigners if one election follows on so relatively quickly after another.

Jonathan Edwards: I take the point the right hon. Gentleman is making, but is he aware that Kirsty Williams, the leader of the Liberal Democrats in Wales, has written a letter to the UK Government saying that the vote should be moved from 23 June?

Tom Brake: I am aware of that, and I suppose one consequence of devolution is that people in different places adopt different positions. Like many others, I am suspicious of the motives behind the Scottish National party’s position: is it about the need to delay the referendum for the reasons it sets out, or is it about increasing the chances that the UK might vote to come out of the EU, in order to facilitate the SNP’s campaign to hold a second referendum? In relation to splits within parties, there appears to be one within the SNP, as the First Minister of Scotland is clear that this should be a positive campaign, but what we have heard here today from SNP Members has been all about the procedure and not at all about the positive nature of what the EU campaign should be.

Patrick Grady: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, like the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats’ position is that if Scotland votes to stay in the EU and the rest of the UK votes to leave, they are happy to see Scotland forced to leave the EU against its will?

Tom Brake: The Liberal Democrat position is that those who want to stay in the EU should be united behind the campaign and should start campaigning positively. That includes not only the SNP but the leader of the Labour party, who perhaps needs to spend some time with the leader of the Labour campaign and draw on some of his enthusiasm so that he can put his back into ensuring that we win on 23 June.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): On suspicious intentions, may I remind the right hon. Gentleman that he campaigned with the Conservative party and the Labour party in Scotland, telling the people of Scotland that if they voted no in the Scottish referendum, they would be guaranteed to remain in the EU? What is his position on that point today?

Tom Brake: I am confident that if we have a united front from the SNP campaigning positively on the matter, from the Labour party and from the Prime Minister—I am pleased to say that he has, after I requested it, come out forcefully behind the campaign in support of staying in—we will collectively win the campaign. I look forward to doing that.

As I said, we need to get on with the campaign, which is actually about the peace, prosperity, opportunity and security that we derive from being a member of the EU; it is not about “Project Fear” at all. The Conservative party, or those on the Benches immediately in front of me, may refer frequently to “Project Fear”, but I must say that quite a degree of whitewash or “Project Status Quo” is coming from those on the Government Benches.

Sir William Cash: I am so glad that the right hon. Gentleman has referred to “Project Status Quo”, because I am sure he will accept that almost nothing has changed, for example, on ever closer union, or in any word of any treaty or law in relation to the EU. Would he therefore be good enough simply to say that he agrees with us that proper, impartial information should be published, and that the current documents simply do not cut the mustard?

Tom Brake: What I will agree with the hon. Gentleman on is the fact that there is a “Project Status Quo”, but I think he has misunderstood the point I was making, which was that there are people on his side of the argument who would like us to come out of the EU and who claim repeatedly that the basis on which we would be able to trade with the EU would be unchanged. They say, “There is no change. It will be exactly the same. We will get exactly the same terms whether we are in or out.” That is why I referred to “Project Status Quo”.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I have made the point many times, as have other hon. Members, that we have a gigantic trade deficit with the rest of the EU, and with Germany in particular. Germany is therefore not going to play games with us on trade, because it will only shoot itself in the foot by doing so.

Tom Brake: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman can read forward two, three, four, five, six or seven years to what the arrangement between the UK and the EU would be if the UK were to leave. I cannot do that, but clearly he is clairvoyant.
One serious question I wish to put to the Minister is whether he is confident that the Electoral Commission and the police will have the resources and the tools they need to ensure that the rules are observed in the campaign. He will be aware of a recent exchange in which the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—I warned him I was going to raise this point in the debate—said in an email:

“It is open to the Vote Leave family to create separate legal entities each of which could spend £700k: Vote Leave will be able to spend as much money as is necessary to win the referendum.”

I hope that the Minister will provide some clarification on that. My memory of being a Minister and being involved with the rules of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 is that it is very clear that if organisations are working in concert—the Vote Leave family suggests that that is exactly what would happen—the total limit would be £700,000, and that to seek to go beyond that by some artificial creation of a number of identities would be a breach of the law. However, the campaign is conducted, we need to know that all sides will treat it in a way that observes the law.

6.30 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): May I start by referring Members, particularly the last speaker, to the comments made by the First Minister this morning? She made it perfectly clear that it is not her preferred outcome that Scotland should leave the Union simply to prevent ourselves from being dragged out of the European Union. She said that she wants the United Kingdom to deliver a resounding yes vote to the European Union. I cannot see that happening if the UK-based yes campaign continues to behave in this way.

This afternoon, we have seen the reality behind the Government’s respect rhetoric. Despite the promises that we have been given time and again, and as recently as a few weeks ago in this Chamber, the views of the elected Governments of three of the four equal partners in this Union are being ignored and trampled underfoot by the fourth partner. That comes as no surprise to us in Scotland, because the Government made it perfectly clear that, regardless of what the sovereign people of Scotland say about our membership of the European Union, others can overturn that simply by sheer weight of numbers.

One very interesting confession today is that the Labour party shares the Conservative party’s contempt for the sovereign will of the Scottish people. If the Labour branch office leader in Scotland had not conceded defeat in the Holyrood elections last week, I strongly suspect that she would have done so very quickly had she heard the comments of the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) just a few moments ago.

The elected national leaders of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all said that the democratic processes in their three countries are likely to be flawed if this statutory instrument is agreed tonight. In Northern Ireland, we even saw the Sinn Féin Deputy First Minister add his name to a letter from the Democratic Unionist party First Minister. Those are two politicians who, for a number of reasons, do not agree on very many things. How much wider a coalition of opposition to this proposal do the Government need to see before they accept that, in this case, sheer weight of numbers is not enough to crack an argument? They must listen, which is what they promised the devolved Governments that they would do.

Sir William Cash: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, especially as he is a member of the European Scrutiny Committee, of which I have the honour to be chair. Does he agree that a democratic question lies at the heart of this matter? If there is information on which the voter is expected to make his decision, as was the case with the Scottish situation a few years ago, the bottom line is that, without genuine and properly sourced information and proper time, the British people will effectively be cheated?

Peter Grant: I do not think that a referendum date of 23 June gives adequate time for the complex issues to be considered. This is the time to be discussing not those issues, but the procedural motion before us so that we can decide on the date. I am up for a positive and, if necessary, heated discussion as to why it is in the interests of all of our nations to remain part of the European Union.

In the interests of time, I will not repeat all the arguments that have been marshalled on the Opposition Benches and, sometimes, on the Government Benches against the proposal deliberately to overlap the referendum campaign with elections in which more than 20 million of our citizens will take part on the first Thursday in May. Let us look quickly at some of the consequences. As has been mentioned, 10 weeks before the referendum—in the middle of April—the Government’s response to the EU negotiations has to be published, including a statement, which we now know will say that the Government believe that people should vote to stay in the European Union. The Scottish Government will be in purdah for a full three weeks after that. Are the UK Government seriously suggesting that it is acceptable for the Prime Minister to issue an official document saying that the United Kingdom should stay in the European Union, while not allowing the Scottish Government to say that they agree because they are in purdah? Saying that they agree will inevitably be seen as seeking to influence the votes in the Scottish parliamentary elections away from the parties that will stand on an anti-European Union ticket—make no mistake about it.

There used to be an agreement that the UK and Scottish Governments would fully respect one another’s purdah arrangements. If this statutory instrument is agreed today, that agreement is gone, and it may well be gone forever. Any attempt to pretend that this Government respect the democratic legitimacy of the Scottish Government will go out the window with it.

People will receive the UK Government’s document on the referendum at the same time, and possibly on exactly the same day, as they receive the polling cards or the postal vote applications for a completely different election. The problem is not just that the elections are held close together—in some ways, administratively, it is simpler if two polls are held on the same day, but it becomes more difficult if the nature of the question is different for those polls. In this case, every single part of the election administration process, which is immensely complicated and which our returning officers and our counting officers cannot afford to get wrong, will be happening twice, a few weeks apart. We will have the
ridiculous situation of people being encouraged to register to vote in one election before they have to turn up at the polling station to vote in the other.

The newly elected national Governments will find themselves back in purdah fewer than three weeks after the parliamentary elections. As has been pointed out, it is quite possible that, if there is a very keenly contested election in any of the three nations, the First Minister of one or of all three nations might not be elected until the Government are back in purdah. We then have a newly formed Government who are restricted in their ability to launch their legislative programme in case some of it is affected by the result of the referendum. That is not sheer speculation, but fact. For example, how can a new Scottish Government announce a five-year spending plan if they do not know whether European Union procurement rules will continue for over half of that five-year period? How can a Government put forward a legislative programme on such crucial areas as fisheries, agriculture, public procurement, investment and tourism if they do not know, and are not allowed to speculate on, whether they will still be a part of the European Union a couple of years later. If this is what the Government describe as being respectful, I shudder to think what contempt for the Scottish Government would look like. The Minister claimed that the EU referendum purdah is different from a parliamentary election purdah. Technically, it is, but so many subject matters will be covered by both that in fact, in practice, the elected Governments will be in purdah as regards a significant range of their devolved powers.

The Government are trying to suggest that a referendum in September will not work, but if a major test of the success of any electoral process is public engagement and public participation, I have to remind the House that a September vote produced the most successful test of electoral opinion that any of these nations have ever seen, whether we measure it by the number of people who took part, the number of people who registered or the number of people who voted. I would much rather see 98% of people registering to vote and 85% of people who took part, the number of people who registered or seen, whether we measure it by the number of people of electoral opinion that any of these nations have ever seen, whether we measure it by the number of people who took part, the number of people who registered or the number of people who voted. I would much rather see 98% of people registering to vote and 85% of people voting than the low numbers we might get in a snap election.

I am ready for the debate to begin. I honestly believe that a date of 23 June makes it more likely that the United Kingdom will vote to stay in. Despite that, I do not want to see the UK voting on a flawed referendum and in a flawed process. I would much rather see a referendum in which everybody participates and for that reason, it cannot be held as soon as 23 June.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 475, Noes 59.

Division No. 201] [6.39 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abbams, Debbie
Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Mr Graham
Allen, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barron, rh Kevin
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benn, rh Hilary
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berger, Luciana
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Betts, Mr Clive
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brady, Mr Graham
Brake, rh Tom
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshires, rh James
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, Robert
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burt, rh Alistair
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cairns, Alun
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Carlingford, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Jo

Ayes 475, Noes 59.
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
White, Chris
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig

Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Phil
Wilson, Mr Rob
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, Mr Iain
Zizzi, Nadiem
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
George Hollingbery and Sarah Newton

NOES
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Arkless, Richard
Bardell, Hannah
Black, Mhairi
Blackman, Kirsty
Boswell, Philip
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Edwards, Jonathan
Ferrier, Margaret
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hendry, Drew
Hoey, Kate
Hollob, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinahan, Danny
Law, Chris
Maskell, Rachael
Mc Nally, John

McCaig, Callum
Macdonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McGarry, Natalie
McLaughlin, Anne
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicholson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Gavin
Salmond, rh Alex
Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Thewliss, Alison
Thomson, Michelle
Vaz, rh Keith
Weir, Mike
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Marion Fellows and Dr Philippa Zahawi

Question accordingly agreed to.
Ordered,
That the draft European Union Referendum (Date of Referendum etc.) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 22 February, be approved.

Opposition Day
[UN-ALLOTTED HALF DAY]

UK Steel Industry
[Relevant documents: First Report from the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, on the UK Steel Industry: Government response to the crisis, HC 546, the Government response, HC 861, and oral evidence taken before the Welsh Affairs Committee on 10 February, on the steel industry in Wales, HC 767.]

6.57 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House notes the crisis in the UK steel industry; calls on the Government to support tougher EU action to ensure a level playing field and prevent the dumping of Chinese steel, to support scrapping the lesser duty rule which prevents higher tariffs being imposed that reflect the actual margin of dumping and to examine the implications of granting China Market Economy Status for the EU’s ability to tackle unfair trade; and further calls on the Government to publish a full industrial strategy which includes a procurement policy which commits to using British steel wherever possible for publicly-funded infrastructure projects and which supports industrial supply chains across the UK.

Britain’s steel industry is in crisis, and despite the warning signs flashing red, the Tories have had to be dragged kicking and screaming to come up with any kind of response. So far, it has been far too little and far too late. More than 5,000 UK steel jobs have been lost over the past 12 months. Redcar has been abandoned, the blast furnace and the coke ovens destroyed by this Government’s shameful complacency and inaction. Tata Steel has announced the loss of 1,050 jobs this year alone, and there are worrying signs that the entire industry in the UK is hanging by a thread.

This is a vital foundational industry for the UK which, after all, was the world’s first industrial nation. Our steel communities are looking to Parliament to support them in their hour of need and we must not let them down. Steel production is worth £9.5 billion to our economy, £5 billion of that in exports, at a time when our trade deficit is too high. The British Chambers of Commerce recently found that export growth continued to slow at the end of 2015, with manufacturers struggling in particular. In the words of a former Conservative Trade Minister, the Government’s own export target is “a big stretch”. The Government have obviously been asleep at the wheel. Ahead of the Budget next month, the Government must acknowledge that on their watch domestic structural weaknesses in the UK economy have been allowed to persist and that they are now in danger of holding Britain back.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The hon. Lady speaks of this time of need. I grew up just a few miles from Port Talbot steelworks and played very poor rugby as a scrum half at a school close by. At this time, is it not better that all parties work together for the good of the British steel industry, rather than making party political points, when it is pretty obvious that the steel industry globally has changed not only in the past year, but over the past two decades?

Ms Eagle: I will be the first to work with Government Members, and I hope that by the time we have listened to the Business Secretary’s reply we will have something that we can all cheer.

The British Chambers of Commerce recently found that export growth continued to slow at the end of 2015, with manufacturers struggling in particular. In the words of a former Conservative Trade Minister, the Government’s own export target is “a big stretch”. The Government have obviously been asleep at the wheel. Ahead of the Budget next month, the Government must acknowledge that on their watch domestic structural weaknesses in the UK economy have been allowed to persist and that they are now in danger of holding Britain back.
Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have also been asleep at the wheel when it comes to the crucial issue of procurement? Will she join me in commending the Daily Mirror for its Save Our Steel campaign, which has been shining a light on defence procurement, in particular, and found that Swedish steel is being used in the Navy’s newest warships?

Ms Eagle: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. Friend’s observations and share his surprise that Swedish steel is being used in Ministry of Defence contracts in quite that way. I note that it appears to be a Conservative donor company that was doing that work. I join him in commending the Daily Mirror for its fantastic Save Our Steel campaign, which has highlighted the very real effects of the current crisis on steel communities up and down the country. Long may it continue to help us campaign to save this vital industry.

In the light of all that, why has the Government’s response to the steel crisis been so complacent and ineffective to date? Perhaps it is because we have a Business Secretary who is ideologically indisposed to taking any worthwhile action as he does not actually believe in the concept of Government action at all. Perhaps it is because we have a Business Secretary who has read far too much Ayn Rand and thinks that markets should somehow just be left to look after themselves. Perhaps it is because we have a Business Secretary who will not let the phrase “industrial strategy” even pass his lips.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend concerned that the Business Secretary will write letters supporting the need to maximise the chances of British steel companies getting more steel orders? The main problem is that there just is not enough British steel being bought. What does she think the Government could do to try to get more steel orders? The main problem is that there just is not enough British steel being bought.

Mark Pritchard: I thank the hon. Lady, who is being generous in giving way—I believe in mixed rugby teams, so she is welcome on the pitch anytime. It so happens that 26 British companies were asked to tender for the offshore patrol vessels to which the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) referred, but only one did, so only 20% of the steel for those vessels will be British. Surely she agrees that it is not for the Government, or indeed for the Opposition, to promote and market individual steel companies, whether British or not; it is for those companies to market themselves, and it is for the Government to set the framework in which they can do the business.

Ms Eagle: I am just getting the idea of a mixed rugby team out of my mind so that I can address the hon. Gentleman’s point. I think that it rather makes the point that the Government need to do more than just change technical criteria. They need to take a root-and-branch look at what is actually happening in our steel industry, and an industrial strategy would assist them in doing that. We need to do what we can to ensure that any blockages are removed so that we can give our steel communities the best chance to take maximum advantage of the procurement opportunities available in this country.

Stephen Doughty: That is absolutely crucial. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a pattern of behaviour here? We have seen foreign steel used in the Tide class tankers, in the scout vehicles and in the aircraft carriers, we have no commitments on the frigates, and we have also heard about Swedish steel being used. That pattern of behaviour across all defence procurement needs to be investigated.

Ms Eagle: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly fair point. The Government should leave no stone unturned in order to maximise the chances of British steel companies bidding for these contracts successfully.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On investment in steel, does my hon. Friend recognise that there is an opportunity to invest in a catapult centre in my constituency and in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley)? That would be a major investment that would take steel forward. That opportunity ought to be embraced, but it is being dismissed out of hand—[Interruption.] The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise says from a sedentary position that it is not, so I am glad that she is embracing the concept.

Ms Eagle: My hon. Friend has anticipated a point that I plan to make later in my speech. I certainly hope that there will be some good news on the catapult centre in the Budget, because we would certainly support that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I agree with the hon. Lady; we need a steel industry and there needs to be cross-party working to try to find the way forward. What does she think the Government could do to try to get more steel orders? The main problem is that there just is not enough British steel being bought.

Ms Eagle: One of the first things we have to do is stop the tsunami of unfairly traded and dumped Chinese steel, which is preventing fair trade and competition in the market at the moment.
The Opposition have had to drag this Government kicking and screaming to the House on no fewer than 12 occasions since 2014 to try to force them to turn their warm, sympathetic words on steel, which we all recognise they use, into effective action. Today, here we are doing so once again. The Opposition motion calls on the Government to stop using the European Union as an excuse for their own inaction. It asks them to support a more effective response to the dumping of Chinese steel, which threatens to decimate UK steel production. It calls on the Government to take tougher action to secure a level playing field for our industry.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): I understand the point that the hon. Lady is making, but I hope she will recognise that the Government have to work within the European Union’s state aid rules.

Ms Eagle: Far be it from me to suggest that the Government should operate outside EU state aid rules; I simply do not think that they are being sufficiently inventive or creative with the rules as they are at the moment. Had they been more interested, perhaps we would not have had to drag them to the House 14 times to keep the pressure on.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): I apologise for my voice—I shall have to whisper.

I have been on the doorstep with steelworkers in my constituency, and, in a spirit of working across these Benches, all I want to be able to say to them is that the Minister has been to Brussels and demanded the highest possible tariffs—the sort of tariffs the Americans have. Then I can say that, in line with the proposals being put forward by the Welsh Government, we are doing everything we can to make sure we have a steel industry in this country—this year, in five years, and in 50 years. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we do not have those tariffs, we risk losing the steel industry?

Ms Eagle: Again, I agree. In this moment, we all have to do the most we can to preserve a future for the UK steel industry.

Our motion calls on the Government to take tougher action to secure a level playing field for our industry by working in partnership with our European neighbours. As part of the largest economic bloc in the world, Britain is in a much stronger position to stand up to those who refuse to play by the rules of the game, damaging our future economic prosperity and putting at risk the jobs and livelihoods of families in our close-knit steel communities. We need a Government who are willing to make that case by standing up to China.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the issue affects not only the steel industry but ceramics? It will cost more than 2,500 jobs in my constituency, unless we send a clear message, as the Minister has said, that China does not meet the criteria for market economy status?

Ms Eagle: I am coming to that later in my remarks, but my hon. Friend is exactly right: all energy-intensive industries are affected, and ceramics is one of them.

If they are accurate, I welcome the media reports from today’s European Union Competitiveness Council, which appears to have agreed that the Commission should accelerate anti-dumping action. I look forward to much more detail from the Secretary of State when he responds to the debate on what that will mean in practice. Until then, we must judge the Government on their actions to date.

Our motion calls on the Government to stop blocking reform of EU trade defence instruments, which would enable defensive tariffs to be imposed much more quickly and at a level that would actually prevent imports of unfairly traded steel products from China. The Government should support the scrapping of the lesser duty rule, which is preventing tariffs from being set at a level that will actually deal with the problem. After months of agitation and a massive increase in Chinese imports, especially to the UK, the European Union has finally set its tariff on a particular product—Chinese rebar—between 9.2% and 13%. Meanwhile, the USA has introduced defensive tariffs of 66%, and they were operating 45 days after the start of its investigation. To work, tariffs have to be high enough to deal with the problem—the EU tariffs are not.

It is important to make it crystal clear that we are objecting to blatant and unfair dumping, not to free trade, which the Opposition support.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I am interested in what the hon. Lady is saying, but does she not feel the chill wind of the 1930s, which saw the infringement of free trade as people eagerly moved to impose tariffs? Over the last 10 years, China’s share of world trade in steel has grown from 30% to more than 50%, so whatever the tariff, there will be further calls for higher tariffs, with consequential disadvantages for all.

Ms Eagle: I was trying to make it very clear that we are talking about unfair trade—dumping. We are not talking about fair trade.

Tom Blenkinsop: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The point is that this is not an example of free trade. China is in breach of World Trade Organisation rules, and it is exploiting export subsidies to such an extent that the Americans are looking at tariffs of more than 200% on Chinese steel. That is not unprecedented: back in 2004, the Bush Administration brought in similar tariffs of about 25% on European steel.

Ms Eagle: My hon. Friend is exactly right: we have to distinguish between free trade, fair trade and unfair trade, and what we face with Chinese steel imports is clearly unfair. Dumping is unfair, and it is threatening the very existence of the UK steel industry. Everyone in the House knows that once steel facilities have gone, they cannot easily be put back. We have to protect our industry’s capacity to exist, and perhaps to do better in future, when world conditions have changed. If we do not bear that in mind, we will lose the lot, and we will regret it.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Lady will find that there is a lot of understanding across the House for the point she makes. My point is just that, over the past 20 or 30 years, we have become reliant on China producing many
things, and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) mentioned ceramics. My concern—perhaps the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) can address this—is about where we make the distinction in terms of the tariffs we impose. Does she not have the slightest concern that a series of such issues may come up in sector after sector because of the growing reliance over the last few years on Chinese exports?

Ms Eagle: We need to have an industrial strategy, and we have to ensure that imports into this country are appropriately priced and fairly traded.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): My hon. Friend is setting out her stall very clearly. Does she not agree that it is particularly important that there is fair trade when a strategic foundation industry that is important to manufacturing, defence and other core activities is being challenged in this way?

Ms Eagle: My hon. Friend is exactly right. I could not agree more about the strategic importance of foundation industries, of which steel is a key one.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Shotton steelworks, which produces “galv” and coated products, relies on Port Talbot for its supply of steel. Although Shotton is a profitable plant, if Port Talbot were to go, it would not be easy to find a good-quality supplier of steel at the drop of a hat.

Ms Eagle: Exactly. My hon. Friend supports his constituents, and he knows exactly what is at stake if the Government fail to protect the fundamentals of this foundation industry.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Eagle: This is the last time, but will hon. Members then please let me get on with my speech?

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who has been extremely generous in giving way, and I am more than happy to support the motion. Is she aware of the work of the devolved Government of Wallonia in Belgium, who have a strategy to protect their steel industry, encompassing an investment fund, an innovative research plant and clear protective measures for steelworkers? Should the Labour Welsh Government pursue a similar strategy?

Ms Eagle: The hon. Gentleman has pointed out that, in some places in Europe, there may exist an industrial strategy, and we could do with one in this country.

Far from fighting for the UK’s interests, as they would have us believe they are doing, the Government are actually a leading part of a group of EU countries that have tried to block reform of the lesser duty rule. That was endorsed by the European Parliament in April 2013 to protect Europe from Chinese dumping. That was challenged in this way, as many in this House will know, this status is granted only when the economic conditions in the country concerned have developed in such a way that it can be shown that prices and costs are genuine and can therefore be used to determine trade defence disputes. China currently meets only one of the five criteria required for this status to be granted, and yet the UK Government support granting market economy status to China as early as the end of this year.

Why is this? We already know that the Chancellor continues to be almost embarrassing in its ineptitude and new in its infatuation so far that it excuses its unfair trade practices. Granting market economy status to China in the absence of important safeguards would significantly diminish the capacity of the EU to guard against Chinese dumping, which has the potential to destroy the UK steel industry, so it must not be granted until the criteria are objectively met. Will the Secretary of State tell us more about why the Government appear to have made their mind up already on this important issue in advance of the forthcoming assessment by the EU Commission? Surely they are not so intent on coddling up to China that they have left all judgment behind.

The Opposition motion calls on the Government to publish a full industrial strategy that is designed to support and grow our manufacturing sector, not just stand by as it is threatened by unfair competition. This should include a proactive procurement policy committed to using British steel wherever possible for publicly funded infrastructure projects and supporting industrial supply chains across the UK. Nothing less will do. In the forthcoming Budget, Labour would support the Government doing more on business rates and exempting new industrial equipment. An industrial strategy must be forward-looking and support our wider industrial base and its supply chains. That is why Labour would also support the Government in going further to develop a materials catapult to drive early-stage investment in this crucial area—an idea that has support from industry and business organisations such as the CBI. Labour Members certainly support it, and I hope that come the Budget we will hear from the Government that they support it too.
The Government are always keen on asserting that they have changed the procurement rules as one of the five steel industry asks that the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise bluntly asserted during the recent urgent question on 18 January had all somehow been delivered. However, these new rules do not seem to be having any impact on actual outcomes. There is no sign that these modest technical changes are making any difference to the awarding of Government contracts to help our domestic industry. Perhaps that is because the new guidance merely states that steel requirements should be “openly advertised” to allow UK firms to compete. Britain’s steel industry needs a real champion in Government, but the Minister excuses the omission of British steel in projects like Hinkley Point C by claiming wrongly that UK steel does “not have this capacity”.

I am beginning to worry about her connection with reality, especially after her appearance on “Pienaar’s Politics” yesterday when she claimed that there is no Tory infighting over the European Union and denied that the Prime Minister had attacked the Mayor of London in a speech last week. I do not know which planet she is on, but it is clearly not the same one that the rest of us inhabit.

The Conservatives have left our economy insufficiently resilient to global threats and not in a high enough state of readiness to seize on future opportunities. If they are to lay solid foundations for our future prosperity as a nation, they have to support our foundation industries. Decisions taken now will chart our economic fortunes for the decades to come. The UK steel industry does not need warm words from this Government: it needs effective action. Our steel communities need it, our economy needs it, and Labour Members demand it.

7.24 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid):

There is no doubt that the past few months have been absolutely devastating for Britain’s steel industry and, more importantly, for the skilled, dedicated people who work in it. It is also clear that the global steel industry is facing an unprecedented set of challenges with multiple factors beyond the control of any one national industry or Government.

The facts are familiar, but they bear repeating. Around the world, production of steel is 30% higher than demand. In China alone, excess steel capacity is 25 times the UK’s entire annual production. Demand here in Europe has yet to return to pre-crash levels. As a result, the international price of steel has halved over the past 18 months, and the impact on Britain’s steelworkers has been all too clear. I have travelled to Redcar and to Port Talbot and seen for myself the challenges the situation has created, and the good work being done on the ground to help the communities cope.

Labour Members want us to demand the removal of the lesser duty rule so that the EU can impose tariffs on all Chinese steel. They apparently fail to recognise that the lesser duty rule does not prevent the imposition of tariffs, nor is it a bar to effective action against unfair trading: it simply ensures that duties are set at a level that removes the harm caused by dumping, and no higher.

Nic Dakin: When the Secretary of State wrote to the Commission and said that it should make full and timely use of the full range of EU trade policy instruments to tackle unfair trade, including anti subsidy measures, to ensure a global level playing field, did he mean that he was going to take action on behalf of our steel industry?

Sajid Javid: That is exactly what I meant. As I speak further, I hope that will become clearer.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On the basis of what the Secretary of State has said, can we expect increased tariffs on Chinese steel in the near future?

Sajid Javid: We believe that under the existing rules the EU can go further, and it must.

Alex Cunningham: Can we expect it?

Sajid Javid: I will come to that in a moment. Under the lesser duty rule, if the dumping margin is 50%, but a duty of 30% is sufficient to remove the harm to industry from that dumping, then the duty is set at 30%. The tariffs recently imposed on Chinese rebar were indeed too low. I am continuing to raise the issue in my regular discussions with Brussels, as I did only last week when I met the EU Trade Commissioner in London.

Mark Spencer: Before my right hon. Friend makes any more progress, it is worth putting on the record the £50 million of support that he and the Minister have already put in place. Will he bring us up to speed on where the negotiations with the EU stand and what sort of timetable he is looking at?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding us of that. As I progress, I will answer his question.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op):

Will the Minister put on the record whether he supports the lifting of the lesser duty rule?

Sajid Javid: No, I do not, because, as I have said, the lesser duty rule is there to create a level trading field. As I have also said, under the existing rule, tariffs can be higher, and in many cases should be higher. However, they were not set too low because of the lesser duty rule. The problem was the time period used by the Commission in its calculation.

Stephen Doughty: The Secretary of State specifically mentioned rebar. As he knows, that is a major product produced by Celsa in my constituency. It is a very high-quality product that has been used in Crossrail and many other projects. Does he expect that tariffs on rebar, specifically, will be higher against the unfairly traded Chinese steel—yes or no?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right that it is suggested that tariffs should be higher to right the detriment. We agree; that is what our analysis shows. That is exactly what we are pushing with the EU Commission, as I did only last week when I met the Trade Commissioner while she was in London.
Huw Irranca-Davies: I apologise for having to whisper again. On rebar and other important products in south Wales, what tariff is the Secretary of State pushing for and when does he want it imposed?

Sajid Javid: I hope that the hon. Gentleman respects that it is not for us or any other state to say what the tariff should or should not be. These are European-wide tariffs. Under the existing rules, it is possible to have higher tariffs, and that should certainly be the case if the dumping does not stop.

Huw Irranca-Davies: I realise that there will be a negotiation process. As somebody who has been involved in European negotiations in a different sphere, I know that it is perfectly within the Secretary of State’s gift to tell us what the UK’s negotiating position is. What should the tariffs on the different products be, and when is he arguing for them to be imposed?

Sajid Javid: When it comes to the steel industry, there are many different types of products and there is no one single tariff that we are looking at. Where appropriate, we are pushing the EU Commission where we think it has not applied the existing rules properly, not just for higher tariffs, but for much speedier action.

Mark Tami: Does the Secretary of State not understand that the clock is ticking and the industry does not have long left? Millions of pounds are being lost each day and it is no good him standing there saying, “Well, I’ve said this and that about next week and the week after.” There may not be a week after.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, but he should also accept that if the entire debate on trade and trade protection in the EU becomes about the lesser duty rule, it will take away from the time and effort required to use the existing rules more effectively.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): If Tata Steel, UK Steel—the umbrella body—and the Community union are all calling for the Government to take action on the lesser duty rule, surely the Secretary of State can see that it is in his gift to give that to the steel industry, which is crying out in desperation for his help.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that that is not in the gift of any single Government in the EU; the issue is EU-wide. As I have explained, it is important to use the existing rules effectively, and we support taking further action where the tariffs are not imposed quickly or if they are not high enough.

Richard Fuller rose—

Sajid Javid: Let me say more about tariffs and then I will take some more interventions. Punitive tariffs and sky-high duties always seem like a nice, easy solution, but the truth is that excessive, protectionist trade tariffs simply do not work. Although they provide a short-term boost for the protected sector, they inevitably cause long-term harm to the wider economy. They drive up prices.

Ms Angela Eagle: We are not calling for protectionism; we are calling for tariffs that prevent unfair trade. When the right hon. Gentleman talks about protectionism, it is important that he distinguishes between dumped and unfairly traded products—which must have high tariffs so that they can be blocked before they destroy our industry—and fairly traded products. We agree with him. We are not against free and fair trade.

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Lady means what she has just said, which is that she wants a level playing field, we are in agreement, but the entire argument she made moments ago was for punitive tariffs, which would drive up prices for businesses and consumers and risk potentially ruinous retaliation from other nations. Artificially over-inflating the price of imported steel would have a hugely damaging effect on British companies further up the manufacturing chain. Of course, I would like to see such companies using British steel rather than cheaper, lower quality imports, and let me take this opportunity to urge them to do so. However, forcing them to buy British steel by making imported steel prohibitively expensive is not the way to make that happen. Higher duties on imports of raw materials eventually mean higher prices paid by manufacturers and consumers alike, putting countless more jobs at risk.

Stephen Doughty: This crucial point is at the heart of this debate. Nobody is calling for punitive measures; we are asking for a level playing field. If we do not level the playing field when other countries, such as the US, are willing to put up their tariffs, this country will get a double dose of the dumping. The effect will be increased if we do not take action. We do not want a trade war; this is simply about levelling the playing field for the British industry.

Sajid Javid: That is exactly what we are delivering on and what the current framework allows us to do.

Richard Fuller: There is undoubtedly anguish in the industries and sectors affected by the impact of change on the steel industry, but does my right hon. Friend agree that, over the past 30 years, global free trade has had the best impact on jobs, wellbeing and living standards, and that he has a responsibility not to indulge in tit for tat retaliatory measures on tariffs in pursuit of a good cause, because of the consequential impacts on other aspects of trade?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That does not mean that it is not possible to have tariffs; of course they are possible when there is unfair trading, and that is exactly what we support. That is what the current set of rules used by the EU allows.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): There is nothing more cruel to steelworkers, many thousands of whom I am proud to represent, than suggesting that all of the solutions to this crisis are in the hands of the British Government. For the record again, will the Secretary of State make it absolutely clear whether the British Government can unilaterally impose the tariffs? If not, will he confirm that it is for the European Union to make that decision? On top of that, is he pushing the EU for higher tariffs than those that have been imposed? It is simple—that is what steelworkers want him to hear.

Sajid Javid: I can confirm all that to my hon. Friend, who makes his point very well. The rules are applied to all members of the European Union. The tariffs are set
after an evidence-gathering process by the EU Trade Commissioner. Clearly, we all want them to be based on evidence so that it can be used to create the level playing field that we all want. My hon. Friend is correct to say that no single country can choose to change a tariff; we must work collectively through the EU rules.

Removing the lesser duty rule would have an impact. We want to address the impact of unfair trade without imposing disproportionate costs on the wider economy. We want to create that level playing field rather than a protectionist barrier. As I have already said—I am happy to say it again—where the evidence suggests it, I want to see the highest appropriate duties imposed. On rebar, which the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) mentioned earlier, the UK industry is asking for tariffs of 20% to 30%. We support that and think that the evidence backs it, but I will never call for any action that could damage British business and hurt British consumers.

The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) called for an examination of the implications of granting market economy status to China. The Commission has not yet published its proposals, but, even if China is granted market economy status, the EU will still be able to take action on unfair trade practices and impose anti-dumping measures. After all, Russia has market economy status, and the EU has taken anti-dumping measures against Russia. Nor would market economy status affect the EU’s ability to tackle Chinese dumping so that appropriate steps can be taken as soon as possible. We have written to the Commission with specific proposals. We have voted to take action on seamless pipes and tubes, wire rod and cold-rolled products. We have supported the Commission’s investigations into hot rolled flat products, and just last week I personally raised the issue with China’s Commerce Minister when he was in the United Kingdom.

It is clear that the Commission can do more within the existing rules, and I am doing everything I can to make sure it does so. That is why the UK has led the way in calling for more effective action. It was the UK that demanded and secured an extraordinary meeting of the Competitiveness Council to agree a European-wide approach to the crisis. It was also the UK that lobbied for an investigation into rebar dumping. We have been pressing the Commission to speed up its investigations into dumping so that appropriate steps can be taken as soon as possible. We have written to the Commission with specific proposals. We have voted to take action on seamless pipes and tubes, wire rod and cold-rolled products. We have supported the Commission’s investigations into hot rolled flat products, and just last week I personally raised the issue with China’s Commerce Minister when he was in the United Kingdom.

Tom Blenkinsop: If what the Secretary of State says is true, why does the director general of Eurofer, Axel Eggart, state:

“By blocking the lifting of the Lesser-Duty-Rule, these Member States”—including the UK—

“deliberately deprive the European steel sector of the chance to receive effective and legitimate remedy against massive dumping”? Why does the Secretary of State think that the representative of the entire steel industry in the European Union says that?

Sajid Javid: I think I have already answered that question. We have been working closely with the industry to deliver as much support as possible. At October’s steel summit, the industry had five asks of the Government. Today, I am pleased to say that we have already delivered on four of them. Let me take this opportunity to thank my colleagues the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, and the Commercial Secretary to the Treasury for their unstinting work.

John Redwood: Will the Secretary of State tell us what he and his colleagues in Government can do to ensure that in big public sector procurement programmes in defence, railway engineering or construction, we get the maximum British content for the steel industry?

Sajid Javid: That is an excellent question, and that was the second ask from the industry. Let me address the first ask, and I will come right back to that point.

The first ask was for lower energy bills. We will shortly be paying compensation on renewable energy costs, and we are in the process of securing agreement to exempt energy-intensive industries from such costs. The second ask was for more British steel to be used in public building projects. We have issued updated procurement guidance to all Departments to make it clear that they can now take into account wider socioeconomic considerations, as well as cost, when making purchasing decisions. We are the first member of the European Union to be able to use those new rules. We have also mapped rough estimates of steel that could be used for major projects including High Speed 2, new nuclear and offshore wind. We have shared those estimates with industry and will continue to keep it updated.

Stephen Doughty: It is interesting to hear what the Secretary of State is saying about the procurement guidance being given to Departments. The Ministry of Defence has told me in answer to a written question that “the Ministry of Defence (MOD) does not hold a complete, centralised record of steel procurement for projects and equipment, either in terms of quantity or country of origin”.

Can the Minister explain why that is, and does he think that it is satisfactory? How will we ensure that Departments meet the procurement guidelines that he has set out for them if the MOD is not even keeping records? I am not talking about specific projects, but it needs to keep records; otherwise we cannot tell whether it is doing what he says it should be doing.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that we are working with all Departments, including the Ministry of Defence, to make sure that they do whatever needs to be done to make maximum use of the new procurement rules.

The third ask from the industry was greater flexibility on EU emissions legislation. We have successfully negotiated longer lead-in times for the implementation of emissions regulations. The fourth ask was for action on unfair trading practices. As I said a few moments ago, we have led the EU in securing provisional duties on unfair imports of rebar steel and cold rolled flat steel. We have welcomed new investigations into unfair imports of hot rolled flat products, heavy plate and large seamless pipes. We continue to pressure the European Commission for further action against unfair trading, including the use of the registration procedure where appropriate.
The crisis facing the British and European steel industry is grave indeed, but the charge that this Government are not doing all we can simply does not stick. We cannot simply increase the global price of steel or reduce the level of production in other countries.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My right hon. Friend does not accept the charge that the Government are not doing all they can, but does he not agree that if we were not in the European Union, the Government would be able to do a heck a lot more?

Sajid Javid: Even if that were the case, we would still be bound by WTO rules and it is possible that we would be far more open to retaliation by other countries as well.

Jonathan Edwards rose—

Sajid Javid: I will give way a final time, but then I must close.
Jonathan Edwards: As the Secretary of State knows, the leader of the Conservative party in the National Assembly has said that he will vote for a Brexit. Would that help or hinder the steel industry in Wales?

Sajid Javid: If the Welsh Government had listened to the leader of the Conservative party, they would have been in a far better position to help the steel industry locally.

There are things we simply cannot do—we cannot simply increase the global price of steel or reduce the level of production in other countries—but we have done everything possible and we will continue to do so as long as such action is needed. We will leave no one behind in this one nation.

7.51 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP):

When I was preparing for today’s debate, I wondered how I could speak on this or similar motions without repetition, deviation or hesitation, which are the famous rules of Radio 4’s “Just a Minute” programme. I will break all those rules, because I will use repetition and—not too much—deviation, while the only hesitation will be when I struggle to find words to explain what the Government say they are doing to help save the UK steel industry.

Since I attended the UK steel summit in Rotherham on 16 October, along with many other Members currently in the Chamber, in excess of 6,000 jobs have been lost across the UK. Job losses at Dalzell plate mill in my constituency and at Clydebridge in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) are included in that number. I will come on to describe how job losses and effective Government action differ across the UK.

Community the union has called for the UK Government to take action now, and has asked them “to do everything in their power to safeguard the future of this vital strategic, foundation industry of fundamental importance to UK manufacturing and industrial supply chains.”

Along with UK Steel and Eurofer, Community has challenged the Government to come out positively for scrapping the lesser duty rule, which inhibits the rate of duty that can be imposed on Chinese dumped steel. It is hypocritical in the extreme for this Government to vote for anti-dumping measures on the one hand and to fight to retain the lesser duty rule on the other.

The Government support market economy status for the Chinese. Where is the sense in that? It is another example of doublespeak. Yes, the Prime Minister spoke to the Chinese about the dumping of steel, but it seems to have been a rather one-sided conversation. We have no proof that the Chinese even listened, as there has been no diminution in the problem. It is no secret that the Government need Chinese money to build nuclear power stations. Is that uppermost in their mind? It is time they put UK manufacturing interests first. The Chancellor has already trailed that further austerity is coming down the track, and where did he choose to make that announcement? Shanghai.

When pushed, the Government have pointed to the five asks put forward at the UK steel summit. They have made progress on some of them—they have managed to get agreement from Europe to implement the energy-intensive industries package ahead of April 2016, but that is of very limited help during the current financial year.

As far as anti-dumping measures are concerned, I have already explained that the Government are in two minds about that, according to industry leaders. There has been no movement on competition from the Chinese manufacturers and, given the Chancellor’s announcement about further austerity measures, it is difficult to see how and when that will happen. There has been movement on gold-plating EU regulations, but that has so far had minimal effect. Progress has been made on procurement guidelines, but that will affect future infrastructure projects and is not helping the UK steel industry at present. We are in dire times.

Alex Cunningham: I was brought up at Harthill, near Ravenscraig, in Lanarkshire, and I have seen the scars that still exist in those communities 20-odd years after the closure. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to take specific action if we are to prevent such scars in other communities?

Marion Fellows: I absolutely agree. The former Ravenscraig site is in the centre of my constituency, and I go through it almost weekly. It is still scarred, and it is still a monument to what happens when steel businesses close down.

Each time there have been job losses in the steel industry, the Government have moved in to help. The help has been to find people other employment; there have been few timely direct measures to help keep steel plants open. The UK Government have been challenged numerous times to come up with a UK manufacturing strategy and to employ joined-up thinking to help foundation industries, including steel. That is what other European countries do.

The comparison between what the Scottish Government and the UK Government have done is stark. Within days of the announcement of the mothballing of the Scottish plants, the Scottish Government set up a Scottish steel taskforce, with a remit to find a buyer for the plants and to do everything possible to retrain and upskill the workforce to make sure they would be ready when a buyer was found. Skills Development Scotland has created the steel industry advanced manufacturing upskilling programme to provide an incentive to retain key and essential staff. That will enable a knowledgeable and skilled team to be assembled quickly when an alternative operator is found.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The hon. Lady is going through the work that the devolved Administrations can do. Does she share my disappointment, however, that from the decks of the 94% British steel-built Queen Elizabeth aircraft carriers can be seen a bridge that the Scottish Government are building with foreign steel?

Marion Fellows: May I ask the hon. Gentleman to excuse me if I move on? That old canard has been dealt with in previous debates on steel. The Scottish Government are now moving on. [Interruption.] I will move on with my speech, if the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise will stop chuntering from a sedentary position—I think I have that wording correct.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy laid the snappily titled statutory instrument 2016 No. 120, Rating and Valuation, the Non-Domestic Rates (Steel Sites) (Scotland)
Regulations 2016, on 24 February, and they will come into force on 1 April and grant rates relief to a new operator taking over Scottish plants.

There have also been discussions with the chief assessor in relation to the 2017 revaluation of rates in Scotland, to look at special measures for steel plants. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has been in touch with the present owners regarding any work that needs to be done in relation to the sites, and Tata has been working closely with Scottish Enterprise to find schemes and other ways to reduce running costs, which will also help any new owner. At each meeting of the taskforce, there is a positive energy and a commitment to retaining the plants for Scotland’s economic future.

On 15 February, the Scottish Government launched their paper, “A Manufacturing Future for Scotland”, which lays out their vision for the Scottish manufacturing sector. I recommend it; it is a great read. It is a positive, forward-looking document that shows the Scottish Government’s commitment to manufacturing. It states: “The Action Plan is based on a commitment to raising productivity through increased investment and innovation”.

It is a road map to success for Scottish industry. As part of the action plan, the Scottish Government have established a joint centre of excellence for manufacturing and skills academy.

The Scottish Government have shown what is severely lacking here at Westminster: a strong political will to help the steel sector and other manufacturing industries boost inclusive growth and exports. The UK Government are so busy with their hands-off approach to vital foundation industries that their mantra of the UK being a world player is at serious risk. This is a country that wants to strut the world stage, but if it is not careful, it will lag so far behind in manufacturing that it will not be able to manufacture the necessities its citizens need.

I ask the Government to look seriously at the mixed messages they are sending out, to get behind the scrapping of the lesser duty rule, to steer away from giving China market economy status and to start investing in foundation industries in the UK. We need to spend more on industry and less on bailing out bankers. In closing, may I just mention that public procurement contracts can take into consideration not just the specific costs but the wider socioeconomic benefits of buying British steel.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate on the UK steel industry.

I would be the first to acknowledge that the constituency of Bexhill and Battle has not, to the best of my knowledge, made a large contribution to the steel industry. However, as my name suggests, my father and those who came before him hailed from south Wales, where the industry has always loomed large. It was because of my background that I put in to speak and, in so doing, I wish to express my support for an industry that the Prime Minister recently referred to as “vital”. It is with sadness that I have watched events unfold in Redcar, Scunthorpe, Scotland and south Wales. In parts of the country that rely on a specific industry, the impact is felt not just by those who are directly employed, but by the many people whose jobs and incomes rely on it indirectly.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has referred to a number of areas of the country, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) mentioned, there are also plants in north-west Wales and north-west England that rely on the industry. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that there is a wider impact, with some 2,000 jobs relying directly or indirectly on the Shotton plant alone, and that it is important to take a holistic view?

Huw Merriman: I accept that point. This issue extends to the whole of the UK, including the constituency that I serve.

The steel industry has experienced challenges that are, as the Financial Times put it recently, akin to a perfect storm. First, since 2000, there has been massive growth in the volume of steel that is produced internationally, particularly by China. Secondly, the recent slowing of global growth, particularly in China, has meant that steel production has outstripped consumption. Thirdly, the surplus steel has been exported, again largely from China, which has pushed the price down for British producers. There is a similar theme in other sectors, such as our oil industry. Accordingly, British steel is being sold at a much reduced price, and because British industry has higher overheads, that has hit our steel industry hard.

That leads us to the question of what the Government can do in the face of global market events. I am pleased that they have voiced their support for the industry and are already working on the action requested in the motion in the following ways. First, they are pressing the EU to prevent Chinese firms from selling steel at sub-market rates across Europe.

Secondly, the Government are taking the lead in public procurement to ensure that, where possible within EU state aid rules, the Government buy British steel. To that end, I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State mention that public procurement contracts can take into consideration not just the specific costs but the wider socioeconomic benefits of buying British steel.

Thirdly, the Government are encouraging British private industry, such as our burgeoning auto trade, to buy British. Fourthly, they are assessing the tax and regulatory
costs and what the industry can do to drive up its competitiveness. The Government have taken a lead in doing that with the industry.

Finally, the Government are driving discussions in the European Council on taking similar action at EU level, as the EU is the second largest producer of steel globally, albeit at about 25% of total Chinese production. I hope that those levers, which the Government and industry are pulling, will reach fruition and assist our steel producers and those who work in the industry.

I would like to respond to some of the points that have emanated from the Opposition Benches. I fully understand why they have been made but, being a Government Member, it would be remiss of me not to comment on them. It is not realistic for the Government to step in and effectively underpin the steel price by pumping money into the industry, for two obvious reasons. First, EU state aid rules mean that the UK is largely prohibited from providing financial assistance that could distort prices between producers within the EU.

Anna Turley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I will not, because I am coming to a conclusion.

Secondly, at a time when our health service is having to find £22 billion of efficiencies in addition to the £10 billion that the Government are pumping in, we have difficult choices to make on behalf of the country about where Government spending goes.

I welcome the many initiatives that the Government have launched, which meet many of the requests in the motion. I hope that they will support our steel industry through this time of market turbulence.

8.7 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): The UK steel industry should be identified as a significant strategic sector of the British economy to help to secure our manufacturing strength and to retain the capability and capacity within the supply chain for our vital and productive industrial sectors such as aerospace, automotives and construction.

Given the industry’s importance and the crisis in recent months, with one in six jobs lost since the autumn, the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee made this issue the topic of our first report of the Parliament. We found that the Government were not sufficiently alert to the warning bells being sounded by the UK steel industry. Although the Government had identified the sector as vital, Whitehall did not have effective warning systems in place. The loss of jobs, skills and capacity in this vital industry is nothing short of a national tragedy. That has spanned more than 40 years, but on their watch, this Government should have been much more proactive in considering the retention of the existing steel capability and employment levels, rather than redeploying hard-working and skilled people to alternative jobs that are often less productive and lower earning, and losing forever these key industrial assets.

The Select Committee also found that UK Governments needed to do more at an EU level to prevent the dumping of Chinese steel—an issue that has rightly been mentioned throughout the debate and that is explicitly mentioned in the motion. It is of central importance and I shall return to it later.

At the steel summit in October, industry made five reasonable policy requests on matters such as energy costs, business rates, procurement, anti-dumping measures, and the industrial emissions directive. In the letter to me that accompanied the Government’s response to the Select Committee’s report, the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise stated:

“We have delivered on four of the five asks of UK steel and on Business rates we await the conclusions of the Chancellor’s review”. In his opening remarks, the Secretary of State said virtually the same thing. In the body of the Government response to our report, the Government said that it has been “unceasing in its efforts to deliver” on those five asks, and pledged to “continue to do all it can in the coming weeks and months to ensure a healthy and sustainable future for UK steel.”

Those are powerful words and phrases, yet I regret that they are untrue, and it is wrong—dishonourable, even—to say that the Government have delivered on four out of the five asks.

For example, on procurement it is true and very welcome that the Government have changed the guidelines to allow for more local content. However—unlike the Minister can correct me—no orders have yet been received in steel plants on the back of that change to the guidelines, and they also fail to include so-called publicly enabled procurement projects. That means that Hinkley Point, one of the largest construction projects that this country has ever seen, which requires more than 200,000 tonnes of steel, more than 600,000 embedment plates, and large quantities of structural steelwork, is not subject to the guidelines; and nor is the massive rolling stock programme. Will the Minister outline any new orders won on the back of those changes? Will she commit to looking at whether publicly enabled procurement projects can be considered within those guidelines?

The biggest issue regarding not only the viability of the UK steel industry but the survival of the entire global steel industry is that of cheap Chinese steel being unleashed on the rest of the world. The Committee’s report acknowledged that the scale of the problem should not be underestimated. We fully accept that even if the Government were able to deliver immediately and in full on all the other asks, the future of the UK steel industry would remain in doubt unless effective action could be taken at an international level to withstand the onslaught of cheap Chinese steel.

China has far too much supply in the face of sharply shrinking domestic demand. Total Chinese steel production is 1.17 billion tonnes, which is more than double that of the four next largest producers—Japan, India, the US and Russia—combined. Chinese surplus capacity in steelmaking is bigger than the entire steel production of the United States, Germany and Japan combined. Despite the rhetoric of Chinese leaders about reducing surplus capacity, Chinese steel production increased last year.

Why would China want to reduce steel output? The closure of local steel mills would throw something like 400,000 steelworkers out of work, putting at risk social order and the ability of the Chinese party apparatus to control matters. Steel mills in China are concerned that...
they will lose market share and have to spend increased capital to start production again. It is far easier to keep operations going now. Chinese banks are urging mills to keep going so that they do not have to make provision for bad loans. Therefore, when considered in terms of the geopolitical situation and the domestic environment, the risk to the Chinese political, social and banking systems as a result of reducing steel capacity means that it is naive of policymakers in the west to believe that the Chinese will allow it to happen willingly. It is therefore imperative that policymakers in the west undertake a concerted and co-ordinated effort to withstand this illegal Chinese dumping. This is not protectionism. The steel market does not have effective competition, and it is being distorted to the point of destruction by a powerful monopolistic power that is immune to the normal pressures of market forces.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Some of us want a proper relationship with the Chinese economy and concede that partnership in some things is very valuable. However, this is about the power of the Chinese economy, and even though my constituency does not depend on British steel, our leading agricultural chemical companies in the world, such as Syngenta, are being taken over—overnight it seems—by a Chinese conglomerate that is really the Chinese Government strategically plotting a course worldwide.

Mr Wright: My hon. Friend is right, and that point was mentioned earlier in the debate. This is about commodities in general, not just steel, and the enormous surplus capacity in other things such as phosphates is incredibly important. It is therefore vital that we have tougher EU action to ensure a level playing field, support scrapping the lesser duty rule, and carefully consider China’s market economic status. Given the Government’s rhetoric that they will be “unceasing” in their efforts and will “continue to do all it can” to safeguard UK steel, those steps are the very least one could expect.

The Committee’s report acknowledged the Minister’s success in changing the UK’s stance to vote in favour of the extension on wire rod, but lifting the lesser duty rule has been ruled out by the Government. In Committee earlier this month, the Secretary of State will recall that I asked whether he would change the UK Government’s position within the Commission on the lesser duty rule, to safeguard the British steel industry as much as possible. He replied that he would not, and he has repeated that tonight, stating that he needs to consider the “impact overall” on British industry and British jobs, particularly in terms of duties imposed.

Nobody would want a protectionist arms race to escalate throughout the economy, but the Minister and the Secretary of State must surely realise that the British steel industry—alongside many other European steel producers—faces an existential threat that is based on a grossly distorted and failing market. This is not about imposing additional duties or tariffs elsewhere on British manufacturing; it is a request, a plea, for a co-ordinated response. The UK steel industry is on its knees. This proud sector, which should be powering the future of British manufacturing, is pleading with the Government to help and to make sure that we have a sustainable future for the steel industry in this country.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee who made a well-informed contribution, and it is a privilege to serve on that Committee with him. I commend the hon. Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), and for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), my hon. Friend the Member for Brigga and Goole (Andrew Percy) and many other Members across the House whose employees or constituents are affected directly or indirectly by the tremendous challenges faced by the steel industry. Their constituents can know that their Members of Parliament are doing the best they can to get the best deal for their constituents, and they are doing it in the most effective way in Parliament. They are a tribute to their constituents.

The steel industry is undoubtedly facing massive changes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) mentioned, the growth of the Chinese steel industry—initially to serve the international market but over the last decade to serve its own domestic market—has created tremendous challenges for the rest of the world economy at a time of reduced demand both in China and internationally. It is fair to say that mistakes were made by the coalition Government and the preceding Labour Government in preparing the steel industry for those changes.

For example, if Members read about energy prices on page 12 of the Select Committee report, they will see that the big change in energy prices for the United Kingdom relative to our European competitors came under the Labour Government in 2005-06. In retrospect, we concede that that was an unsupportable burden for our energy intensive industries, and the Government were at fault not to assess that. Equally, the coalition Government were at fault in not responding to the pressures placed on them by Members of Parliament to make subsequent changes.

I heard what the Secretary of State said about business rates, but I hope that he and the Chancellor will look again at what can be done with that, not just in the steel sector but more broadly in industry and retail. Business rates seem to me a tax that is very relevant for change.

Tom Blenkinsop: The hon. Gentleman mentioned 2006, but in that period Corus was bought by Tata because of the economic signals, and it thought that it was a good purchase. Celsa in south Wales refitted the electric arc. Judging by the indicators, including energy prices, industry at that time thought that Britain was a good investment.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Gentleman’s intervention was timely because I am about to talk about industrial strategy. As he pointed out, mistakes can be made, and when the Committee had a vote on whether we should mention the industrial strategy, I was the only member of the Committee to vote against that. Personally, I believe that Governments’ industrial strategies are nonsense, a mirage, a deceit, or, too often, a failure. Governments can take actions, they can spend money and they can show their preferences and priorities. All of that I accept, but an industrial strategy becomes a straitjacket that limits our actions and can set us up for big problems in international trade.
Finally, the core of what we are discussing today are duties. The Secretary of State was absolutely right to point to our responsibilities under the WTO with regard to tariffs, and the fact that that sets a framework for us to respond. He is making those calculations in a careful way. It was interesting and I think welcome to many that he believes further changes on tariffs could be made within those rules. He is also right to say that changes to the lesser duty rule are not appropriate at this time.

As I mentioned in an intervention on the shadow Secretary of State, I am fearful of what the tariff and counter-tariff arguments can do. Many Members have talked about what the United States is doing and that we should therefore do more, but this is where the breakdown of global trade begins: tariff and counter-tariff, competitive devaluation, recession and slump. When we perceive that a change in tariffs is fair and not about trade but about dumping, I would say to hon. Members that just because we may believe that that is the case does not mean that that is how it is perceived by those on whom those tariffs are imposed. The consequence of the Chinese economy having a retaliatory effect on the United Kingdom and other countries is where the breakdown in global trade can begin. Free trade is a global good.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that we are in exceptional times, and that by suspending the lesser harm rule and presenting the Chinese Government—most Chinese heavy steel plants are state-owned—with a major fait accompli, we might force negotiations on China to restructure its steel industry, whereas if we just proceed piecemeal we will not resolve anything?

Richard Fuller: If I may, I would like to address that point directly in a few minutes.

Free trade is a global good. It enriches us. It broadens choice. Free trade, by bringing people of the world together, makes us safer. We have a responsibility, even in these difficult and straitened times, as the hon. Gentleman says, to protect free trade. Those of us here in the United Kingdom have a special responsibility to protect free trade, because we have been one of the major proponents of free trade over the past century and a half. That is something worth protecting and worth bearing in mind at all times.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) asked whether we should, essentially, toughen up in these special times with China. I think we are seeing indications that China understands it needs to toughen up as well. China has said—I am not an apologist for China; trust me, I like the other China—that it wishes to reduce its productive capacity, with one quarter of its production being taken out of commission. It is planning to reduce employment in this sector by 400,000 jobs. China is taking steps that indicate that it sees a responsibility to satisfy not just its own consumption and demand but its responsibilities in the global economy. Members should bear those thoughts in mind as they come to their conclusions.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend’s defence of free trade is admirable, but he is not suggesting, is he, that the Government are wrong to look at various ways of mitigating the problems that the steel sector is facing, in particular with regard to energy and on procurement?

Richard Fuller: My hon. Friend is exactly correct. That was outlined by the Secretary of State in his speech and is, I think, warmly welcomed on both sides of the House.

I commend the shadow Secretary of State for an excellent start to the debate, and for her clarification of her continuing support for free trade. That is an important message to be heard on both sides of the House at this difficult time. She understands, as I think many other hon. Members do, that there is a very special concern for the people affected by the steel industry. I think she also understands that there is a broader responsibility for the community as a whole to uphold free trade. I am sure she would recognise that the task for her opposite number, the actual Secretary of State for Business, is that he has to make those very difficult judgments now. He has to listen to representations from Members of Parliament about the impact on their constituents. He also has a responsibility to ensure that the United Kingdom remains a strong voice for free trade, ensuring that the right penalties are placed on dumping and that the broader interests of the economy of the United Kingdom are upheld. I believe he is doing an excellent job.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The gulf in understanding between those on the two sides of the House is rarely more obvious than when we talk of heavy industry. It is clear that the Government, with all the good will they may have towards the industry, are in alien territory. The best they have been able to produce today is not a man or a woman of steel, but someone who lived within sight of a steelworks. I speak with a little authority on this, because I started working in the steel industry in 1955 and was still there 30 years later.

There is a feeling of grief about the terrible destruction of the steel industry. People have talked about the scars on the countryside. It is painful to see areas that were once breathing fire and steam—where there was life, prosperity and energy—now wastelands of rubble and brambles. The real suffering is felt by those who worked there. They suddenly find that their often unique skills, the scrap of dignity around which they built their self-regard and their life, have been stripped away. They live the final years of their lives lacking that sense of self-respect, their ability to have the prosperity they expected torn away. I am very proud, with my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), to represent Newport, which relied on the steel industry in perpetuity to a Chinese company. It is unbelievable. We look back with amazement to see the future of our industry to be colonised by the Chinese. It is unbelievable. We look back with amazement to see what we have done. We have mortgaged the future of our nuclear industry in perpetuity to a Chinese company. So that we can have the Hinkley sprat, we have given them the mackerel of Bradwell and the other power stations of the future. Something has happened with Hinkley Point and it is about time the House woke up to it. A former Secretary of State for Energy has written a book. He said on the “Today” programme this morning that Hinkley Point is a dinosaur. In the past fortnight, articles in the Financial Times and The Economist have said that it does not make sense to proceed. It is a basket case. It is a disaster in the making. All the
sensible investors, including Centrica, which invested £200 million, have gone, and all that is left is this cheap, Chinese money and EDF.

Where is EDF? EDF had a debt of £37 billion, and if it were not a nationalised company, it would be bankrupt. It is pulling away because the technology planned for Hinkley Point is a dinosaur—it has never worked anywhere. The EPR reactor in Finland should have been producing electricity seven years ago, but it is not, and there is no sign of it doing anything. It is the same with the Flamanville EPR. It has a major fault; there is a split in the steel in the vessel. The whole thing might never happen. These huge sums are at stake, yet the Government go blindly on in their belief in nuclear power. There is another side to this, too.

Richard Graham rose—

Paul Flynn: I would rather not give way; too many people want to speak.

One has a belief in a different kind of energy. Mr Sanjiv Gupta recently rescued hundreds of jobs in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East. He believes in tidal energy. His company is without any debts and is free to spend its money anywhere. It has already saved jobs and it plans to create at least 1,000 new jobs, and the investment is based on tidal energy, not on the myths of Hinkley Point that will never happen, but on the tide, which flows up and down, washing the walls of Hinkley Point and our constituencies. It is the second highest rise and fall of tide in the world, with massive untapped power. It is clean, British and the source of power is freely available to us. It is entirely predictable and it is virtually eternal: it will go on for all of human time. The power is vast. If it is combined with pump storage schemes, when the tide is producing energy that is not required, it can be used to pump water up to the valleys, so it can become entirely demand responsive.

There are two views on the issue. We know that the problem with the steel industry now and in the future is that it needs prodigious quantities of energy, and until we get entrepreneurs with imagination who believe in the practicalities of life, there will be little chance of progress.

Let me make one final point. I was somewhat provoked to make it when I heard that the farmer Andrew R. T. Davies, who is the Opposition spokesman in the Welsh Assembly, has announced that he wants us to come out of Europe. The only advantage I can see of coming out of Europe is that it would allow us to look at the subsidies that all farmers get, averaging £220,000 per year per farmer in Wales. If we come out of Europe, the question must be asked how we could possibly go on investing 30% to 40% of the total budget of the European Union in an industry that produces less than 2% of our gross national product—an industry that is in serious trouble, and is not competitive. Yet what is the attitude of the Government? They want to save it, and they will put through any kind of subsidy. It will be unlimited, because this is a party in which farmers are grossly over-represented and from which steelworkers are entirely absent.

8.32 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): How do you follow that? What I would say is that in describing as a “dinosaur” something that would be Britain’s biggest single construction project and would create 25,000 jobs west of Bristol, it comes as no surprise to me that one party is in danger of becoming extinct in the whole of the south-west peninsula.

Why have I, as the MP for Torbay, which has no direct steel links, come along to this debate? It is because the issues raised in this debate impact on us all. I look at some of the firms starting to expand around Torquay, exporting high-tech, high-quality manufactured products, and realise that if China started to move into those markets as it modernises its economy, we could be debating those types of products in a few years’ time and seeing what China might do.

I am interested in the impacts of what we are talking about on the ground. Some concepts can sound rather odd—the idea of a “lesser duty rule”, for example, and the impact it might or might not have in this area. There is a debate to be had about how the European Union can modernise some of its trade defence practices, so that where issues such as this come up, they can be responded to more quickly.

Given the numbers provided by the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), it is clear why it is so important that we work as part of 28 states. In view of the sheer scale of China and what it is doing, if we were trying to operate as 28 separate individual states, we would face the danger of each of us being picked off individually, as happened in the 1930s. That would be most worrying for us. It will therefore come as no great surprise to hear that I am one of the remain voters among Conservative Members, and I view it as absolutely right to bring a united front to this issue. We should bear it in mind, however, that not so long ago the European Union was busy dumping surplus agricultural products into the markets of, for instance, African countries. When we request other countries not to dump into our markets, we must also ensure that we in the European Union practise what we preach, and do not inflict on other countries what we are complaining about in relation to some of our own industries. I accept that the lesser duty rule is not making a direct impact in this instance. I am talking about the principle of how the correct tariffs are created and decided, on the basis of advice from industry.

The Government should also think about the way in which our procurement works. I was interested by the response to my intervention on the speech of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), but I think it is worth pointing out that from the decks of the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carriers in Rosyth, 94% of which were constructed with British steel, it is possible to see a major construction project that is being built with steel from elsewhere in the world.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP) rose—

Kevin Foster: Let us hear the defence. I will happily give way to the hon. Lady.

Hannah Bardell: At the beginning of the hon. Gentleman’s speech, he asked what he was doing here. Perhaps his purpose was to be the proponent of misinformation. I can confirm to him that during the procurement process to secure fabricated steel for the new Forth crossing, no company from Scotland, or from the United Kingdom as a whole, made a bid for the contract. A further subcontract for steel fabrication
was awarded to Cleveland Bridge in Darlington, and raw steel was supplied by Tata in both Scunthorpe and Motherwell. I hope that that clarifies the position, and that the hon. Gentleman now stands corrected.

**Kevin Foster:** It was interesting to hear those comments, which sounded very similar to the comments from the Government that the hon. Lady has been attacking.

**Tom Blenkinsop:** The hon. Gentleman has been making some interesting points. However, I believe that the contract for the bridge was originally given to a Spanish firm, which had to pull out. Cleveland Bridge came back in, and made sure that the contract used Tata steel from Motherwell and Dalzell. Those two plants are on the verge of closure, but they also make the sonar-specific plate that will be used for the renewal of the four Trident submarines. The contract is integral to both sites.

**Kevin Foster:** What the hon. Gentleman has said proves yet again that there is not just a massive security argument in favour of building the four Successor submarines, but a considerable economic justification. In south Devon, I can look at the site in Plymouth where the submarines are being refitted. [ Interruption. ] It is always lovely to have an accompaniment from the Opposition Benches. I hear it regularly, and I thoroughly enjoy it.

The hon. Gentleman's intervention has made clear why it is so vital to build those submarines. I look forward to his joining me in the Lobby when we vote on the issue, although we know that the people whose jobs rely on the Trident contract can expect absolutely no support from the Scottish National party.

We can do a great deal more when it comes to procurement. The Hinkley Point project, for instance, will create a huge number of jobs in the south-west. We need to create an infrastructure that will meet the demand. I hope that a significant amount of British steel will also be used in the construction of the Stonehenge road tunnel.

It has been interesting to take part in the debate, and to listen to some of the comments that have been made. I find it particularly interesting to hear demands for unilateral action from those who, like me, argue for us to remain in the European Union. Membership of the EU has many advantages, but unilateral action on tariffs is not one of them. However, 28 of us, working together, can make more of a difference.

I shall not be supporting the Opposition motion, which will probably not come as a huge surprise, given some of the arguments that we have heard. I think it is right that the Government are playing a proactive role in the European Union to prompt action and to modernise their own procurement rules to ensure that we can defend our own industries, but also to ensure that, for our own projects, we buy as much British steel as we possibly can, respecting the fact that our country would not believe in state aid even if we were committed to it under European rules.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. I am afraid that I must now reduce the speaking time limit to six minutes.

8.39 pm

**Tom Blenkinsop** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): There are a lot of issues that we could talk about today, including the Government's unilateral introduction of the carbon price floor tax on energy intensive industries, but I will not go into that now. I have beaten that drum many times in this House. We could also talk about procurement contracts or business rates, but the two elements that I want to focus on are the lesser duty rule and Chinese market economy status. Those two issues are of primary concern to the UK steel industry.

Today at the Competitiveness Council in Brussels, industry Ministers from across the EU are discussing actions actively to support the European steel industry, to enable the sector to compete on a fair and level playing field within the global market. This meeting follows the extraordinary Council meeting on steel that was held on 9 November last year and the High Level Conference on 15 February this year. Today's meeting is the last-chance saloon for this Government and our steel industry. Only last week, for example, the chief executive of Tata Europe, Karl Ulrich Köhler, quit the company. We have to bear that in mind and try to determine what it says about Tata's future in the UK. The tsunami of underpriced, unfairly traded steel, most notably from China, is destroying the steelmaking capacity of the UK and the EU.

This brings me to the primary point at issue. In order to retain virgin steel production in blast furnaces in the UK, we must deal with two immediate threats if our nation's steel industry is even to stand still. Those threats are the lesser duty rule and Chinese market economy status. Europe currently uses the lesser duty rule to impose the lowest possible duties on unfairly traded products that have been dumped in European markets. That means that duties introduced by Europe are usually way below the actual margin of dumping. The result is that the dumping continues and unfairly traded products are allowed to compete in European markets and depress prices.

The United States does not follow the lesser duty rule, which means that it can implement much tougher sanctions that reflect the actual margin of dumping. For example, the US recently imposed duties of 236% on a particular grade of Chinese steel. Furthermore, the US Government are in the process of introducing new laws that will enable the US to take even tougher action against Chinese dumping. The consequence for Europe, and for the UK in particular, if we do not take action as a European Union and if the Government actively prevent the EU from improving our standing, will be to exacerbate the amount of Chinese dumping in our domestic market and in our own EU market. It will actually affect our own exports, never mind our ability to look after ourselves.

The director-general of Eurofer, Axel Eggert, has stated:

“By blocking the lifting of the lesser duty rule, these member states deliberately deprive the European steel sector of the chance to receive effective and legitimate remedy against massive dumping. It is member states with steel production and jobs that continue blocking an agreement within the EU Council to remove this outdated rule.”

He goes on to state:

“It is most notably the UK”. 
Richard Fuller: I think that the hon. Gentleman and I have a substantial disagreement on this point. Is he not worried that if the European Union were to follow America in imposing very high tariffs, the United States would impose even higher tariffs? Would we not get into a situation of ever-higher tariffs being imposed by either side, which would reduce global trade?

Tom Blenkinsop: In 2004, the Bush Administration imposed tariffs of more than 20% on European steel going into the US market. That level was eroded through negotiation. At this moment, China imposes tariffs on our products—British and European—that are already going into its market. So that tit-for-tat has already started. China already imposes huge tariffs on EU products going into its market. Why are we not protecting our own market and the European market—which, I might add, is the largest in the world—is beyond comprehension. I repeat that this is not about protectionism. It is about levelling the playing field to give British steel a domestic safe place to trade, within the European Union and externally. At this time, however, China is not abiding by World Trade Organisation rules, which must surely affect its future market economy status, which will be debated by the European Union.

This brings me to the point about market economy status. Currency manipulation by China has also acted as a subsidy to its exports to EU member states and other countries, while China reciprocates by taxing EU exports. This, along with direct export subsidies, support policies and the rapid growth of planned investments in leading and pillar industries in China’s five-year development plans, has led to sustained, deliberate overproduction and substantial excess capacity throughout Chinese manufacturing.

Even without MES, China has dramatically increased its exports to Europe by a remarkable 11.1% annual rate over the past 15 years—they rose from €74.6 billion-worth to €359.6 billion-worth in 2015. Put simply, the Government support Chinese MES, whether Britain is within the EU or outside it. I would argue that we may negotiate internally or externally, but we are in a far more difficult position as a population of 70 million than as the largest economic bloc in the world. The forecasts suggest that whether this is done inside or outside the EU, Chinese imports will rocket by between 25% to 50% in the next three to five years if MES is granted. That is devastating for not only steel, but every other industrial manufacturing sector. I come from the Teesside area and we do not just make steel there. We must not write it off steel in our area, because we still have the beam mill in Redcar, Skinningrove in my constituency—

Mr Iain Wright: And Hartlepool.

Mr Iain Wright: And Hartlepool. We have Hartlepool tube mill. We have a fantastic story to tell and we want further investment there. By granting MES, we are putting at risk not only steel, but our vast chemical processing industry in the Tees area. Energy-intensives, be they ceramics, chemicals or steel, are at real risk. We cannot afford to be duplicitous on any potential contract, be it a defence, construction or export one, but that requires a Government to make policy that defends their own British steel industry.

Alex Cunningham: I want to focus a little on energy costs and the absence of a level playing field for energy-intensive industries. The damaging effects of energy taxes levied on the business in the UK, leading to UK energy costs being twice as high as those among EU peers, are well understood. This comes on top of regulatory costs charged across the EU, such as the EU emissions trading scheme. British policy measures add 26% to the typical electricity price paid by an energy-intensive consumer in the UK, with steel a major loser. Yet we have still to see the compensation package for energy-intensive industries implemented in full, and the sector is still paying 70% of the policy costs that the full package aims to address.
The EU commission provided state-aid approval for proposals to compensate the industry in relation to the costs of the renewables obligation and feed-in tariffs in December 2015. Although we await the full implementation of the first part of the compensation scheme, there remains a second application that concerns competitors of those receiving compensation. Until that second application is approved, some companies are without access to much-needed compensation and exposed to 70% of climate change policy costs. I hope the Minister can give us an update on what is happening with that second application.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you know of the closure of the SSI plant in Redcar and the loss of other steel jobs in Teesside, many of which are from my constituency. We appreciate the limited action that the Government have taken on Teesside even if the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee report criticised the Government’s initial response, which was focused on compensating those affected rather than saying what could be done to save the plant. I recognise that we need to look to the future, so I ask the Minister what hope there is for steelmaking capacity on Teesside.

I am very aware of the hundreds of millions of pounds it will cost each year just to maintain the SSI site and keep it safe. I am also aware of the proposal from Lord Heseltine to have a mayoral development company in Tees Valley run locally by local politicians and his ambition to have the SSI site invested in that new body. He and the Minister for the northern powerhouse, the hon. Member for Stockton South (James Wharton), appear to be excited by the proposal, and the development organisation is very welcome. Many of us, including some of those same local politicians, are very concerned about what it will mean. Lord Heseltine was at pains to explain to the media, including on television, that the financial buck rests firmly with the Government both for the maintenance and the redevelopment costs of that site. Time and again, he claimed that the Government had to take responsibility. Tonight, I invite the Minister to confirm that not only will there be support for steelmaking in Teesside, but that there may even be the possibility of increased activity in the future, and that the open-ended commitment made by Lord Heseltine on behalf of the Government in relation to the SSI site, and therefore in relation to Teesside, is a commitment that she recognises and will ensure is actually fulfilled.

Christina Rees: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Chinese steel is far inferior to UK steel.

The Government could also take action against the large amount of Chinese steel being dumped on to EU markets, yet, again and again, they have left all such options to the side. The statistics speak of the importance of the steel industry in Wales. There are more than 6,300 jobs in Wales, over 4,500 of which are in Port Talbot and Trostre. Of that 4,500, almost a quarter are filled by people who live in my constituency of Neath. At this time, my constituents still do not know who will lose their jobs. For many, the plants in Port Talbot and Trostre are a way of life and have been for generations. Not knowing whether they will have a job in a month or two is absolutely unbearable for them. I know personally of the community that has grown up around the plants. My father worked at the Abbey, which later became the Steel Company of Wales and then Tata. When I was a schoolchild, I played hockey for the steel company. It was the centre of the community; SCOW put food on our plates at home and contributed enormously to our social and sporting lives. The same sense of community applies today to the 4,500 workers and their families that still work at and depend on the plants. The threat of the closure of Trostre and Port Talbot is more than I can contemplate, given the devastating effect that it would have on communities.

The Minister insists that the Government are doing all they can to help the industry, but that requires action rather than the warm words that they are offering. There is so much that the Government can do, especially about the dumping of Chinese steel on the market. The prospective change in dumping calculation methodologies away from the analogue method towards local Chinese prices and costs could result in the direct loss of at least 310,000 jobs in EU industries already badly hit by dumped Chinese exports. That is in addition to the hundreds of thousands of indirect jobs that would be at stake. Surely, rather than the Chancellor moving ever closer to the Chinese, he should not grant market economy status to China until it fulfils all five EU technical criteria and not before a thorough EU-wide impact assessment, including a full public consultation.

It is important to tackle the dumping of steel because our current anti-dumping measures cannot counter the massive blow caused by Chinese steel import surges.
Lifting the lesser duty rule would remove the cap on anti-dumping and anti-subsidy levels, simultaneously bringing the EU in line with everybody else, but the Government have chosen to be the main player in blocking those changes. Will the Minister assure the House that the Government are doing all they can, including reversing the decision to impose low-level duties on Chinese rebar and supporting the steel industry by supporting the lifting of the lesser duty rule? Even the former European CEO of Tata agrees. He has said that as long as trade defence protections are not introduced, the dumping of steel below its cost of production will continue.

The UK steel industry had 280,000 jobs in 1970, but now it has only 30,000. That is 250,000 jobs lost in less than 50 years. When will the Government wake up and pay attention? Will they pay attention before it is too late? EU options are also available to us. Why are the Government not moving forward and allowing the modernisation of EU trade defence instruments that would stop it taking a year and a half from complaint to definitive anti-dumping measures?

Many regions in the world are more effective at providing a level playing field for their industries and deploy trade defence tools faster and more effectively. As a consequence, dumped goods find their way on to the European market much more easily. The Government would prefer to argue with themselves over the issue of the EU than to use our membership of it to save the UK’s steel industry and the jobs of my constituents in Neath.

The president of the European Steel Association, Eurofer, has said that if we do not use the trade defence instruments available to us there is a substantial risk we will see more plant closures and job losses. Given the wide number of options available, why are the Government not standing up for UK steel in the EU and arguing for modernisation? Over and over again the Government have missed their chance to save the UK steel industry. The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise has told the House that the steel industry is vital for the UK, yet the Government are treating it with contempt and playing fast and loose with the livelihoods of the tens of thousands of workers in the industry.

The Welsh Government are doing all they can within their power to help the affected communities in Wales. They are working tirelessly to provide support to the industry, but, as the First Minister has said, the fundamental question facing steel production in Wales goes far beyond the devolved responsibilities of the Welsh Government. He has said that the UK Government must step up and play their part.

8.59 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I am grateful that we have been able to secure this debate. Ever since last month’s announcement of 750 job losses at the Port Talbot steelworks, I have been calling for a full and comprehensive debate on the future of British steel. The Tata steelworks in Port Talbot is the beating heart of my Aberavon constituency. These job losses, and those that are sure to follow along the supply chain, are a devastating blow.

The Secretary of State will be aware that following that announcement, Tata has been working on a rescue plan, which will be discussed by the Tata board in Mumbai at a critically important meeting at the end of next month. I implore the Government to give their full support to the rescue plan by, for example, ensuring that there is proper investment support to improve the plant’s premium product capabilities. Such support could help in converting the continuous annealing process line into a galvanising line, thereby better serving the automotive market. Can the Minister confirm that she will urge the Chancellor to give a firm and positive commitment on enhanced capital allowance, to allow the Welsh Government Tata taskforce to move forward in establishing an enterprise zone in Port Talbot?

I will now focus on what the Government should be doing at national and European level. It is well known that this Government operate inside a fog of laissez-faire ideology. Their modus operandi is to pray to the gods of the free market and hope for the best. But it is fascinating to observe that this steel crisis is cutting through that fog, and forcing the Tories to understand a very simple truth—that when the market fails, Government should intervene.

The market economy can function effectively only if it is regulated. Just as a game of football requires the offside rule to ensure fair competition, so the British steel industry requires the right regulatory framework, so that it can be given a fighting chance, on a level playing field. The impact of the market failure, and of the Government’s failure to intervene to fix it, is being felt around the country by the thousands of steelworkers and their families. They are victims of the Government’s laissez-faire doctrine. They are the victims of the Government’s failure to stand up for British steel.

All of us here today will be aware of the five industry asks. The Government like to boast of delivering on four of those five asks, but a cursory glance at the scorecard demonstrates how disingenuous that claim is. Take the compensation package for energy-intensive industries. Five years after the Chancellor accepted the need for it, the money still has not arrived. Perhaps the cheque got lost in the Christmas post. And what about procurement? There is no tangible evidence of any change. If there were, why on earth is the MOD’s latest order for a set of Royal Navy frigates going to be based on Swedish steel? Why would a Government seriously committed to supporting the Welsh steel industry still be flip-flopping on the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon?

Most disingenuous of all is surely the Government’s claim that they are acting against the dumping of anti-competitive subsidised Chinese steel. If anyone doubts the acute impact of Chinese steel dumping, they should just look at rebar. From almost no market share in 2011, Chinese rebar accounts for almost half the UK market. That is the cost of five years of Conservative Government, five years in the fog of laissez-faire dogma and inaction, five years of watching the storm clouds gather on the horizon and refusing to strengthen the flood defences, five Tory years of rolling out the red carpet for Beijing, rather than standing up for the men and women who form the backbone of the British economy. May I therefore implore those on the Conservative Benches to resist the temptation to blame Labour? The exponential growth in Chinese market share has taken place since 2011, on their watch. Let us accept that fact and move on.
The growth in Chinese market share is possible only because of Beijing’s subsidies and market distortion—70% of Chinese steelmakers are state owned. In the light of this fact alone, who in all seriousness could possibly see China as a market economy? I’ll tell you who: the British Government. Yes, our very own Government have taken it upon themselves to become some sort of outpost of the Chinese PR machine. UK Steel, Tata and Community have all stated unequivocally that the granting of market economy status to China would probably be the last nail in the coffin for UK steelmaking, yet the Prime Minister and his Government are actively lobbying in Brussels and across Europe, for China to be granted that status. The decision on this will be taken in December. There is still time for the Government to change their mind. There is still time for the Government to be a cheerleader for Britain, rather than a lobbyist for Beijing.

But market economy status is not the only area where the Government are actively undermining the British steel industry. It has become widely recognised in Europe that the lesser duty rule is killing our industry. Indeed, the European Commission proposal that it be scrapped was supported by the European Parliament. Yet the UK continues to be the ringleader in blocking the scrapping of the lesser duty rule. I have grown used to warm words being matched with frozen actions, but this is much worse. On trade defence and the lesser duty rule, this Government have publicly declared their undying commitment to British steel, while behind closed doors they have consciously conspired to undermine the British steel industry. The gaping chasm between their words and their deeds needs to be explained. I hope that they will do so in the near future.

We need a Government who are committed to a long-term industrial strategy and who are more committed to Britain than they are to Beijing, not spinning a line in public while agitating for the opposite behind closed doors. We need a Government who will stand up for British steel.

9.5 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I would like to thank Labour Members who are responsible for the allocated Opposition debate time being used to bring this issue to the forefront again. It was with an incredibly heavy heart that I learned of the planned closure of the Clydebridge steel treatment mill in my constituency. Although the site employs far fewer people than the rolling mill in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), or sites represented by other Members in the Chamber today, the closure and the associated jobs losses are just as devastating. The work of the trade unions on the ground in my constituency is to be commended, and I am sure that sentiment will be echoed across the UK.

The human cost is sometimes secondary to the loss of industry in media coverage, and it would serve us all well to remember that thousands of jobs have already been lost and many more are at risk. Each one of those jobs represents mortgage and rent payments, food on the table, electricity and other utility bills, clothing, council tax, and all the other outgoings that steelworkers and their families face. The crisis facing the industry is causing crises in the homes of steelworkers the length and breadth of Britain. Every job loss holds its own unique story and its own heartbreaking strain on families. Every job loss is a hammer blow to local economies and communities, and it puts more jobs at risk along the supply chain.

I have heard Government Ministers say too often that they are taking action to protect jobs, but reality betrays that assertion. The industry is haemorrhaging jobs. It is an industry on life support. I make no apologies for saying that the Government have simply not acted swiftly or decisively enough. The Tory manifesto claimed that they are “the party of working people”. Rhetoric is well and good, but the steelworkers in Clydebridge are some of the hardest-working people I know, and they deserve to be supported properly.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon moved swiftly to establish the Scottish steel taskforce. As a member, I have been impressed by how much that multi-agency body has achieved. Its approach has resulted in real interest from alternative operators, with the possibility remaining that both mills can be kept operational by a new owner. If that is the case—I hope it is—the new operator will be able to resume production swiftly owing to the Scottish Government’s steelworkers retention plan.

Action has been taken on business rates, in addition to new public procurement guidance on steel. A new action plan, “A Manufacturing Future for Scotland”, specifically singles out the steel industry as a vital strategic asset in the Scottish economy, while acknowledging the particular pressures it faces. It also details further specific measures to help steel and other energy-intensive industries, such as a new expert advice and support service, which will work with operators to develop feasible and cost-effective business plans to implement energy saving opportunities.

The measures taken by the Scottish Government are bold and forward-thinking. We need to see some of that from the UK Government. I welcome the measures taken thus far and appreciate that the Government have listened and taken some action, but they need to keep going, as there is more to be done. The crisis facing the steel industry still exists, and we need to face it down.

It is nothing short of a disgrace that the UK Government are blocking proposals to raise tariffs on Chinese steel. The lesser duty rule must be lifted, and the Government must act to support that. That is the kind of bold action that is needed in order to start levelling the playing field. Excuses for not doing so have been incredibly flimsy and sufficiently lacking in backbone to be classified almost as invertebrate. The scales are currently weighted against us—tipped unfairly by massive amounts of subsidised Chinese product. Unless we force a rebalancing, the situation will not change. I do not see that happening; indeed, the opposite seems to be true, as we move towards a situation where China will gain market economy status, as advocated by our ever willing Chancellor.

In short, an already dire situation looks set to get worse. In years to come, I do not want to be in the position of saying, “I told you so.” I want the UK to act like the superpower whose image the Government are so desperate to project to the rest of the world. We will do that by ensuring that this vital strategic asset is protected, not by making absurd concessions to make friends, and certainly not through utter intransigence.
Who will respect us if we hand our centuries-old industry to our bigger, cheaper rivals? We owe it to our rich history, to our steel towns and cities, and most importantly to our hard-working steelworkers throughout the UK to stand up now and take the bold action that is so desperately needed.

9.10 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): As I make my contribution, I am mindful of the fact that steelworkers in my constituency will soon find out whether they still have a job, because the consultants doing the job matching will soon finish their work. Up to 750 jobs will be lost in south Wales, with the losses in Llanwern, in my constituency, very much wrapped up in the announcement of the job losses at Port Talbot. Although the Tata press release talked about Port Talbot, it is hugely important to workers and their families in Newport, not to mention in the wider economy, that we remember Llanwern, because the effects are being keenly felt there.

Before the debate, I asked Newport steelworkers what comments they would like me to make to the Minister—I know other hon. Members do that before steel debates—and they said, “Please just keep saying what you said last time: that our industry needs help now. Please remind the Government that we are here.”

Time and time again, we have come to this Chamber asking for real action from the Government for the steel industry, but despite the debates, the questions and the summits, the industry and the unions tell us that not enough tangible progress has been made. That message came out loud and clear from the recent Welsh Affairs Committee hearing on the problems in the steel industry in Wales. In evidence to the Committee, Tata’s director of strip products, Stuart Wilkie, talked about the three things the business needed to survive in Wales and counteract the perfect storm it faces: increased efficiency, reduced costs and Government support.

On efficiencies, Tata has already made major inroads into downsizing the business’s production capacity, and my constituents know only too well the effect that that has had, be that on the pickle line or the mothballed hot mill.

We have seen the reduction in costs over the years in Newport, including job losses, as Llanwern has reduced in size. Only last year there were 97 contractors on site, and now they have gone. We must remember that behind every job loss is an individual and a family.

On the third element—the support the industry gets from the Welsh Government and the UK Government—the Welsh Government taskforce has been well received. It is proactive, and it is welcome that there is a voice for steelworker representatives. The taskforce does what it can with the levers it has at its disposal. From the Welsh Affairs Committee session, I know that Tata and the unions say that the dialogue with the Welsh Government and the assistance from them are exceptionally good.

In the case of Westminster, the industry says that there has been progress, but it has not been speedy enough, and there has been little bottom-line impact so far. We have had to take the job losses and the efficiencies, but we need tangible help to make sure that there is a strong plan to move us through the next two years. I cannot reiterate enough that that really matters for flex plants such as Llanwern.

On energy, companies will not see the money from phase 2 of the energy-intensive industries package until March, and they have waited two years for action. On dumping, the Government say they are doing something, and they are making supportive noises, yet they oppose the scrapping of the lesser duty rule, as we have heard many times today, and they support the granting of market economy status to China.

On procurement, more could be done to bring the Government together with companies to find out what is needed and how it can be supplied. Good work is going on in infrastructure projects in Wales. The Government say they have produced their guidance, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) asked: what practical impact has it had so far? The message repeated relentlessly at the Welsh Affairs Committee hearing was the need for more speed and more action, and the need to monitor our industry for the longer term to try to see what is coming—to anticipate and look ahead.

Steelworkers in my constituency have seen major restructuring over the years, and I know of the understandable fear, worry and concern that that breeds. As my hon. Friend said, our steel communities are looking to the Government in this hour of need. The Government need to put their warm, sympathetic words into action, because those working in steel feel that they have been far too slow to act. On behalf of the workers in my constituency, I call on the Government to support the steel industry far more proactively in the Budget.

9.15 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who speaks with great passion about the impact of the steel industry on her constituents. It is very much the same for my constituents, who are currently going through 900 job losses. Coming down here this morning, I found myself on the same train as Ian Smith and Paul McBean, the leaders of the Community union in Scunthorpe. I pay tribute to them for the work that they have done, alongside Martin Foster of Unite and, indeed, all the steelworkers and their families in Scunthorpe, in going through this very difficult time and leading the way forward. It is good that there are ongoing discussions with Greybull Capital about the future of the works. I commend everybody who is supporting those discussions, including those in Government. These are difficult times and we will face a very difficult future, whatever it is, so it is important that those discussions are successful.

I want to give a sort of half-term report on the Government’s progress so far on the industrial asks. The Minister, for whom I have a lot of regard, is fond of saying, “We have delivered, largely, on these asks”, but I think she will recognise, along with me, that it is a job started but still to be finished. First, on business rates, the Minister herself recognises that there has been little progress, but points us with a mischievous twinkle in her eye to the forthcoming Budget. I hope that twinkle bears dividends in the end and we see some movement on business rates.

Secondly, on energy costs, it has taken over three years for us to get delivery on the mitigation for the carbon floor tax, which the Government unilaterally applied. As my hon. Friend said, the money is still not in the coffers of the steel makers. On energy costs, I would appreciate it if the Government looked at the
flawed EU emissions trading system proposal to see what can be done about it. It needs to be offset against indirect carbon costs, because otherwise it will do further damage to the UK steel industry through carbon leakage to other parts of the world and will fail to deliver what it is intended to do.

Thirdly, the Government are to be congratulated on bringing forward new procurement guidelines, but frankly, guidelines are not worth the paper they are written on unless they have an impact on how the Government and their contractor base deliver. There are a few tests we can apply. We can look at what is going on in defence; many Members have alluded to the issues there. I was pleased that a Defence Minister said today that there was a desire to push the guidelines down the procurement pipeline, but the Government need to push hard to make the difference that we need. I commend to them the work that Network Rail does, because we have there a pipeline of best practice that needs to be matched in other industries.

On renewables, DONG Energy has just got the contract for developing Hornsea Project One. However, the test will be whether UK taxpayers, through the very generous contract for difference deal, and UK energy bill payers, are financing the delivery of renewable wind farms built with UK steel or with other steel. The Government need to keep their eye on that, because it is a real test of their procurement rules.

The job has begun and it is, in theory, going in the right direction, but unless it has an impact it will be worth nothing. I know that the Minister wants to see impacts, so I will be interested to hear how she is going to ensure that the great expectation she has given us is delivered on.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab):
This has been a fascinating debate. Members might ask why an MP from Oldham is present in a debate about steel—we do not have a steel industry to speak of—but I have seen the demise of manufacturing in my community. When we talk about numbers in this place, we have to relate them back to the families affected. Communities are destroyed when industry disappears. We have heard time and again about the interventions that could be made, and my hon. Friend has made a fantastic point about them, but does he have any faith in this Government to deliver on them?

Nic Dakin: It is the Government’s duty to deliver, and we have to work with them to make that happen. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) said right at the beginning of the debate, they have been dragged kicking and screaming towards delivery. We need them to deliver faster, because our communities, the steelworkers and their families do not have the time to wait. That is why the Government need to step up to the steel plate and deliver before it is too late.

The fourth issue is dumping by communist Chinese. If I had said 20 years ago that a Government would be in hock to communist China in undermining our manufacturing base, people would have said, “That’s what you’d expect from the Labour party,” but it is a Conservative Government who are doing it, which is remarkable—they are in hock to communist China.

We need to take action on the lesser duty rule. The Secretary of State said that the Government can take action in other ways, but we need more details of how they will take action against Chinese dumping, to make sure that there is a fair and level playing field. Nobody wants benefits; all we are asking for, on behalf of our industries, is a fair playing field, and that is what acting on the lesser duty rule will achieve.

Many Members have spoken at great length about market economy status. During Foreign Office questions last week, I was pleased to hear the Foreign Secretary repeat the commitment that market economy status would be determined and seen through the prism of steel. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that unless China delivers on steel in the way that it should, it will not get market economy status.

In conclusion, my constituents are very keen on this debate and want the Government to do even more to deliver so that my constituents and my community can have good jobs and a good future.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): As always, it is a privilege to speak about an issue that is so important, not only for my constituents but for the future of the whole UK steel industry and manufacturing industry, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) has said. I pay tribute to the Celsa workforce in my constituency; to those who work for Tata and the rest of the steel industry in south Wales; to the Welsh Labour Government, who are doing so much for the steel industry in Wales; and to trade unions such as Community, whose union reps are standing up and working with the management to try to find solutions and get through these incredibly challenging times for the industry.

I do not want to repeat many of the arguments that have been made. This is the umpteenth debate we have had on this issue, and the Minister is well aware of the wider circumstances and challenges facing the industry, so I just want to zero in on some specific concerns.

The Secretary of State was slightly disingenuous when he tried to present us as protectionists who want to foment trade wars in the world. That is not what we want. I reiterate that this is about levelling the playing field so that we relieve the pressure on the industry that is the result of dumping and unfair production.

I was pleased to hear what the Secretary of State said about rebar. If he moves in that direction, it will be welcome, but the industry will want to know at what level he really thinks the tariffs should be set and when that will happen. We can also discuss why that did not happen earlier, and why he did not fight earlier for those changes in Europe. The Secretary of State for Wales and I met many months ago and discussed those issues, and we were well aware of the concerns. If the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills is moving in that direction, will he tell us when it will happen and at what level the tariffs will be set? He made a convoluted argument about the lesser duty rule, but that will not wash with the industry. The industry wants to know what action the Government will take and when.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that if a decision is made to impose tariffs as an anti-dumping measure, the whole
point is that they have to be at a level that makes a significant difference to the price? Otherwise, the danger is that it becomes a token gesture.

**Stephen Doughty**: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I said, if we do not put those tariffs up and other countries do, our industry will end up with double or triple dumping, with all its consequences.

The Minister has talked on many occasions about the compensation package. It has been long in coming, and its announcement was welcome, but the reality is that a lot of that compensation has simply not yet been paid. I have spoken to Celsa, in my constituency, in recent days. Can the Minister tell us how much compensation has been paid out and what difference it is making today? I am not talking about promises for the future; I want to know what difference it is making today.

I want to bring the Minister’s attention back to the charter for British steel, which we have discussed on several occasions. It laid out a clear set of arguments about sustainability, quality in procurement, and the sort of steel that we can produce, which we should be using in our construction and infrastructure projects. BS 6001 certification shows that steel has been manufactured in a sustainable and responsibly sourced manner and that, crucially, it can be traced back to its raw materials. In defence infrastructure projects or projects such as Crossrail—in which Celsa rebar has been used—we want to ensure that we use high-quality British steel that can be traced, and which has high carbon standards and high-quality standards, so that we can be sure it will be there for the long term.

There are some wider questions that I would like the Minister to answer. I turn briefly to procurement, because I think the Government have been somewhat disingenuous in claiming that the whole thing is done and dusted and that action has been taken. There have been welcome statements from the Minister and others about the guidance that is being given. I am concerned, however, about the fact that although we are asking Departments what they are doing, the Ministry of Defence has said that it is not keeping the records. The Secretary of State said earlier that his Department will be helping other Departments. He needs to get in there and ensure that Departments are keeping the records in the first place, as well as driving and advertising opportunities for procurement. Look at the list of projects: the Tide class tankers, the Scouts—now Ajax—and the frigates. The MOD keeps the records in the first place, as well as advertising and opportunities for procurement. There is still no answer on the customisation of the Tide class tanker, which was made in Korea. Those are the real questions.

The Minister was chuntering earlier about doing down the industry. We can produce that high-quality steel in the UK, and we should get to the bottom of why British energy costs than companies in Germany, as well as the dumping that the Government have been warned about so many times. If Ministers do not deal with those concerns, there is no possibility of pan-European co-operation. Why did it take so long for the Secretary of State to get out there and make that case in Brussels? Will she give us the absolute assurance that, during the next crucial months for the industry, she and he be will out there making that case on the duties, procurement and cross-European infrastructure? Only by doing that will we achieve the benefits for the steel industry that all of us across Europe want.

I want to see a future for the steel industry. I am glad that the Government are being pulled, kicking and screaming, on some of the issues. We need action and for it to keep coming, and we must ensure that we have a future for the steel industry in south Wales and across the whole of the UK.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. Sorry, but I have to change the time limit to five minutes.

**Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, but I am afraid that I contribute to debates on steel with a heavy heart and a bitter taste in my mouth. I led such debates back in September to plead with the Government to intervene and to save the steel works in Redcar, but I now stand in the Chamber to represent over 3,000 people who have lost their livelihoods and their identity, and to represent a community that feels let down, cheated and bereft. It is a tragedy that, despite representing a constituency that forged the steel that built the bridges and skyscrapers of the world in the 20th century, I stand here to represent a community that feels lets down, cheated and bereft. I am here because I owe it to my constituents, and those who fought so hard and with such dignity for our own steelworks.

I and my Labour colleagues will keep battling and fighting for steelworkers throughout the country and for the future of this vital industry. At this point, I want to pay tribute to others who are fighting so hard to save our steel—the steelworkers who have taken their campaigns to Brussels and around this country, and particularly the Community union and the Daily Mirror newspaper for their fantastic campaigns. We have to keep fighting to ensure that Britain is a country that still makes things; to make sure that our homes, our ships, our railways and our submarines are built with British steel; and to make sure that our industrial engineers have jobs and that our young people have a future where they make something more meaningful than a latte or a Subway sandwich.
Steelmaking would be an industry with a future if only it had a Government that believed in it. Steel is integral to the long-term success of our advanced manufacturing, particularly in relation to the automotive, aerospace and rail sectors and to our sovereign capability in the defence and nuclear industries. Steelmaking can be competitive in this country, and we on Teesside can still play a role. We just need the Government to take action. Teesside still has the potential to be a hub for developing new technologies, and to lead the way in the circular economy—re-engineering waste, recycling and energy recovery. Where once we may have produced carbon, now we can capture and store it or even reuse it. Where once we forged steel, we may yet be able to recycle it with electro-arc furnaces. We just need a Government who believe in us.

That is why I will continue to press the Minister—I hope that she will, in turn, press Innovate UK and, ahead of the Budget, the Chancellor—for the establishment of a materials catapult for research and innovation on Teesside, focusing on the early stage of metals development.

Jim McMahon: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the Chancellor seems to spend a disproportionate amount of time speaking to the Chinese about investment to fund the northern powerhouse investment pitch book—of course, to appeal to parts of the UK that other potential Conservative leadership candidates cannot possibly reach—than supporting our own industry? Will she join me in warning Conservative Members that if our industry dies, Britain dies too?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. There is no greater testament to the lack of progress of the northern powerhouse so far than the devastating loss of steelmaking on Teesside. If the northern powerhouse means anything at all, it means jobs, industry and growth on Teesside, and on that count the Government have failed.

With the materials catapult for Teesside—the existing research and development hub, which is the materials processing industry in my constituency—the Government have the perfect opportunity to put right some of their wrongs and to help some kind of steel phoenix to rise from the ashes in Teesside. Teesside can build on its industrial strength and once more play a vital role in driving the UK’s industrial and high-tech economy of the future.

But we need a Government that will support us, a Government that will commit to an industrial strategy and a Government that, dare I say it, will invest. What we do not need are a Government that fail to play their role on the global stage, but that is what we have seen. The Chancellor has been out in China, and I can only imagine how grateful it is to him that his Government have actively blocked our European colleagues’ efforts to increase tariffs on Chinese steel in the EU by scrapping the lesser duty rule. I can only imagine how grateful it is to him that his Government are such cheerleaders for China in seeking market economy status, which would give the green light to Chinese steel flooding in. President Obama has pledged aggressive action through the trade Bill in Congress, and the US recently imposed duties of 236% on a particular grade of Chinese steel.

I, for one, am fed up with the Government and Government Members pretending that membership of the EU is the reason they cannot act. Instead, I want them to work with our European partners to impose tariffs and tackle dumping. I am frankly embarrassed that it is the UK that is leading a small group of nations in opposing higher tariffs on China because of the Tories’ ideological obsession with a market economy that sees jobs, communities and entire industries as a price worth paying for their kind of laissez-faire, unfettered global market.

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): You know that’s not true.

Anna Turley: We have heard it from the Government Benches tonight.

We will keep fighting and holding the Government’s feet to the fire. No more job losses, no more closures—we need the Government to act. We want the Government to stand up for Britain. We want the Government to save our steel.

9.35 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure and a privilege to bring up the rear, so to speak, in such an important debate. If I may be light-hearted for a moment, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) was challenged to a rugby match at the beginning of the debate, so I am pleased to inform her that I took part in the first mixed rugby match recently, representing the MPs and Lords. I even scored a try. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray!”]

The number of debates we have had on this issue and the number of times we have returned to it show the strength of feeling not just across this House, but across the nations of the United Kingdom. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who spoke passionately about their constituencies, as did Members from across the House. My colleagues have been involved in the Scottish taskforce and have done extensive work in engaging with their respective local communities on the future of the steel industry in Scotland and in standing up for their rights and interests. As they said, the steel industry has been at the heart of their constituencies for generations. Our thoughts continue to be with the many towns and communities across the UK that are at the mercy of the volatility in the global steel market and the glut of steel production, as well as the UK Government’s lack of commitment and action.

I pay tribute to the work of everyone on the Scottish taskforce, including the union representatives. I am particularly pleased that they have been included in the Scottish taskforce, in contrast with the situation at the outset south of the border. They were at the heart of our discussions and engagement from the very beginning.

Fergus Ewing MSP, my colleague in the SNP Government, is the Minister for Business, Energy and Tourism. He faces many challenges, but he and his colleagues in the Scottish Government and Parliament, including Clare Adamson MSP, who is from a steelworking family, continue to work tirelessly to keep the Dalzell and Clydebridge steel plants open. They are committed
to finding a buyer for the sites, continuing commercial production and keeping as many jobs as possible onsite and in Scotland.

The strategic importance of the plants to Scotland and the UK cannot be overstated. It is apparent in the specialist skills and knowledge and the innovative approach that are inherent in Clydebridge and Dalzell. According to UK Steel, the Dalzell plant is the only plant in the UK capable of rolling and processing the steel that is used in the Ministry of Defence’s special armour plate and for certain requirements of the offshore oil and gas industry. The Clydebridge plant specialises in producing difficult-to-make high-strength steels that are used in some of the most challenging environments in the world. We truly have a world-class industry that we in Scotland believe is worth fighting for.

However, when the UK Government are faced with an opportunity to fix the issues, they are flat-footed and seem to shy away. A case in point is the issue of tariffs, which has been discussed extensively this evening. It is shameful that the UK Government have actively blocked the proposals to raise tariffs on Chinese steel. The UK Government confirmed in mid-February that they had blocked proposals from EU members to block the dumping of cheap steel products in the EU by China. The Government’s blocking of the proposal came after the Secretary of State signed a joint letter from European Ministers, pledging “to use every means available and take strong action” against China and Russia. He has the means at his fingertips, but he chooses not to use them.

The UK Government must work harder with their European partners to address the dumping of cheap steel in European markets, which is, as we all know, undermining UK steel production. Although 2% of UK steel demand was met by Chinese imports in 2011, that figure has been forecast to rise to 8% this year and next. We are all keen to hear from the Minister on that point.

The message is clear: there are vital skills, innovative approaches, and a unique and distinct heritage in Scotland and the UK steel industry, but how far will the Government go to save it? When I was doing research for this debate, I came across an article in the _Scunthorpe Telegraph:_

“Scunthorpe’s main steel union Community has slammed Business Secretary Sajid Javid for saying the UK steel industry could not expect to be to bailed out in the same way as the banks.”

A spokesman for the Community union said:

“The Prime Minister himself has said that steel making is ‘vital’ to the UK economy, so these are ill-judged remarks from Mr Javid. I could not agree more.

The UK Government have the money, political will and determination to bail out the banks, but they cannot find it in their heart, or indeed their pockets, to support an industry that is of vital strategic importance to our economy. I am not, of course, calling for the nationalisation of steel production assets, but I simply suggest that the Government are short on political will and creativity in supporting the steel industry in its time of need.

9.40 pm

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): Again, we are debating the crisis in the steel industry in the context of thousands of job losses, closures of steel plants, and an industry hanging by a thread, with the livelihoods of 20,000 workers, their families and communities under threat, and all that in an industry worth £9.5 billion to the UK economy and which ran a trade surplus in 14 of the last 17 years. The problem we face now is that of the dumping of cheap Chinese steel on the global market. The challenge is how we defend highly skilled British jobs and the future of a vital industry, and safeguard an important source of exports in the face of this crippling and difficult situation. We must support the wider economy by taking a strategic view of what is in the national interest.

We have heard excellent contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), for Newport West (Paul Flynn), for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), for Neath (Christina Rees), for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for Redcar (Anna Turley), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth).

The steel industry and the thousands of people that it employs are looking to Parliament and to the Government for support. The industry has come to the Government with five key asks to help to protect jobs and exports. Although there has been some belated progress, the Government’s response overall shows that they are not prepared to take an active role in protecting the steel industry. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool said when commenting on the excellent BIS Committee report, we must do more at European Union level. The Government claim that four out of five asks have been delivered, but on procurement no orders have been received in steel plants since those changes were made.

My hon. Friend told us that cheap Chinese steel needs effective international action if it is to be tackled. China is responsible for four times the combined production of the next biggest four steel producers, and unless there is co-ordinated, concerted effort internationally to combat illegal dumping, nothing will change. We were told that the British steel industry faces an existential threat through the grossly distorted market, and my hon. Friend’s plea, and that of members of his Committee, was for a co-ordinated approach.

The industry needs swift action on tariffs that protects steel produced in the UK and other EU countries against Chinese dumping, yet our Government have played a role in blocking that. The Prime Minister’s office opposed the idea of fairer tariffs on the grounds that it was protectionism—something confirmed a number of times throughout the Secretary of State’s speech today. Ensuring that we have a level playing field to protect our workers and businesses from a situation that threatens to destroy an entire industry is not protectionism. On the contrary, it is common sense and it is right. As Gareth Stace, the director of UK Steel, said:

“Anti-dumping measures in the EU do not currently have the teeth to halt this tsunami of dumped steel”.

The Government must support the lifting of the lesser duty rule, because otherwise steel manufacturing will be lost in the UK and across Europe. It is a simple ask, and one that is supported by other EU countries,
yet the UK Government have failed to stand by their own country’s industries, not just in steel but in ceramics and other energy-intensive industries.

The Government have also shown little action on changing business rates for large manufacturers. I sit in Committee last week with the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise and heard of her commitment to an overhaul of rates. When it comes to it, however, the review first announced in 2011 is still to start and the industry continues to pay twice when it comes to rates on investment in plant and machinery. The industry was told that helping plant and machinery manufacturers was unaffordable. The Government review rumbles on as we wait to hear what they will do to support investment in plant and machinery. Will they tackle existing competitive disadvantages suffered by UK steel sites on plant and machinery, which account for up to 50% of their business rates?

Serious challenges have coalesced around the steel industry: a glut of global supply, energy costs, high business rates and a strong pound. The industry did not expect the Government to offer a silver bullet. What it rightly expected was for the Government to play their role in what should be a partnership. The most successful economies are characterised by partnership between government, industry and the workforce. For partnership to be effective, the Government have to play their part. Businesses and workers, through the trade unions, have played their part, but what of the Government? The situation demanded that the Government see the long-term strategic value of steel production and act accordingly to protect high-skill jobs and the future of a key strategic industry. The Government, however, failed to intervene to save the Redcar coke ovens. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough rightly described that lack of support as an act of industrial vandalism.

An industrial strategy is nothing more than a Government’s willingness to enter into a partnership with business and workers: to match their ambitions by looking beyond election cycles and investing in the infrastructure and the training they need to flourish; to see the long-term value of strategic industries; and to take the necessary steps to support and safeguard them. If the Secretary of State and his Ministers want to be a true partner to the steel industry, there are few clearer steps that the Government must take now. [Interruption.] If the Lord Chancellor had been here earlier, he would have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) saying that.

The Government must block the unfair trading of steel by supporting EU trade defence instruments, allowing the swift implementation of defensive tariffs. The Secretary of State must throw his support behind tariffs and ensure they are set at a level that would protect UK steel. He and his colleagues should support the EU countries that have supported a level of tariffs that will help our industry and our economy. Remember that at one stage it looked as though the Secretary of State accepted the need for change. He signed a letter with counterparts from France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Belgium and Luxembourg demanding that the European Commission use every means available and take strong action in response to unfair trade practices. Sadly, a week later he told the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee that he was opposed to that very action, something he confirmed this evening when he said he was against removing the lesser duty rule. UK Steel director Gareth Stace described the U-turn as “galling” and said that “government must support the lifting of the lesser duty rule, otherwise steel manufacturing will be lost in the UK and Europe.”

We need to take an active role in tackling Chinese steel dumping and need action on business rates for key industries and capital-intensive firms to level the field for UK steel by pursuing reform of tariffs at EU level. This is what the industry needs. It is what workers and their families need. It is what communities need, and it is what the wider economy needs. Until the Government take these steps, and until the Business Secretary begins to engage with a long-term industrial strategy to defend and promote UK businesses and workers, belated supportive words will be seen as nothing more than empty rhetoric.

9.49 pm

**The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry):** I begin by paying tribute to all those who work in our steel industry. As the Prime Minister describes it, it is indeed a vital British industry. Those workers are without doubt hard working, skilled and dedicated. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Community trade union leader, Roy Rickhuss. It is pleasure to do business with him; we do not always agree, but he undoubtedly leads a fine band of men and women. Of course, we also have to remember and recognise all those who have so unfortunately been made redundant in recent times. Our thoughts are indeed with them, their loves ones and their families.

I pay tribute to all hon. Members of all parties who have spoken in the debate. Let me explain the simple truth, which is a harsh fact and reality, as the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) knows. I was slightly disappointed in her speech, although it has sometimes been a great pleasure to work with her. She well knows that SSI was losing £600 million in just three years, and we all know the huge scale of Tata’s losses. Those are the harsh realities, and no Government can alter the price of steel. In some sectors of steel, prices have halved over a year, while consumption across the world has yet to reach the levels of 2008.

This is not a Government who have stepped back and not done anything. On the contrary, we have seized this nettle and got on with it. We had a steel summit, and the industry made five specific asks of us—and we have delivered on four of those asks. The fifth, which is rates—[Interruption.] As I was saying, on rates, we hope to be able to deliver in the way that I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would like—but we have delivered. It is strange because every time we deliver as we are asked, what do the Opposition do? They just shift the goalposts.

Let us go through the asks and start by looking at procurement. We have changed the rules of procurement, and I was disappointed to hear the hon. Member for Redcar saying that these were only minor and technical changes. Far from it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) said, these are good and valuable changes; they include skills for the supply chain, which are just some of the new factors. Yes, we will evaluate them and make sure that Departments deliver because these are not guidelines—they are mandatory.
The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) says that the Government should do more, but she has not told us whether the SNP in Scotland have changed their procurement rules. We know that they have not. On energy costs, we were asked to take action and we have taken action. We have got compensation and gone further than the ask made of us, and in relation to two of those significant charges, we are going to make sure that these are properly and fully compensated and effectively removed from next year.

Flexibility on the EU emissions directive is another ask on which we have delivered, and then we come to the issue of the dumping of steel by China. It is not just China, if I may say so; it is a number of countries, and that needs to go on the record. I take particular exception to some of the comments made by Labour Members, because in July we voted for the first time for tariffs on wire rod—of some 24% by way of charge. Then we voted again in November.

It is the lesser duty rule that has been so effective. Let me provide an example of the work we have done. On rebar, if we did not have the lesser duty rule, the charge would have been some 66%. In fact, what the industry wanted was a charge of about 20% to 30%. We have worked tirelessly to achieve that. The EU has set the figure at 9% to 13%, and it is this Secretary of State who took that argument and led the charge. We continue to do that with tubes and on cold rolled steel as well. That is the work that this Government have been doing, and I am proud of our record, and we will continue to fight when it comes to tariffs on Chinese and other countries’ steel.

Let me make something clear about the lesser duty rule. What it does is effectively ensure that the right balance is struck so that it is not overly protective, but tariffs are there at the right level to do the right thing by British steel. All that I will say about China and market economy status is that Russia has market economy status, and that has not prevented the European Union from imposing tariffs on it—and rightly so. I suggest that that is another very large red herring tossed in by the Opposition because we have delivered on asks that the industry and the unions have made of us.

What have we done? What has the Secretary of State gone and done? He went to Europe and called an extraordinary meeting of the Competitiveness Council. Far from sitting back in the European Union, we are going further than the ask made of us, and in relation to the issues of illegal subsidies and, most important, electricity prices.

Anyone who wants to help out the British steel industry will support Trident, but where was the Leader of the Opposition on Saturday? On a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament march.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put. Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 239, Noes 288.

Division No. 202] [9.57 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Anderson, Mr David
Akrless, Richard
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackman, Kirsty
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddes, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair

Doughty, Stephen
Dowell, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrell, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Gilchrist, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hoe, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Kendall, Liz
Kearney, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinnock, Stephen
UK Steel Industry
29 FEBRUARY 2016

UK Steel Industry

Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Mr Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaig, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Harra, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Oswald, Kirsten
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Emma

Reynolds, Jonathan
Richie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Gavin
Rotheram, Steve
Ryan, rh Joan
Salmond, rh Alex
Shannon, Jim
Shepherd, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulp
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Ruth
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeling, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewiss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Ummuna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Grahame M. Morris and Jeff Smith

NOES

Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Bur, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damien
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djankoly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Dwyer, Steven
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freyer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus

Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh David
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hafon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollowbone, Mr Philip
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Jackson, Mr Stewart
Javid, rh Sajid
Jawaharaden, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Commonwealth War Graves Commission: Pension Fund

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

10.9 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, and my position as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group. I have secured this debate tonight to bring to the attention of the House the pension fund of employees of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Let me thank the three trade unions that have a membership interest—PCS, Unite the Union and Prospect—for raising these concerns with me and other right hon. and hon. Members, as well as the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) who serves on the Commission, and the Leader of the House for their helpful information. I must say at this point that I was disappointed with the communication that I received from the War Graves Commission director-general, to which I will return.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission cares for more than 1,700,000 casualties of the first and second world wars in cemeteries and memorials at more than 23,000 locations in over 150 countries. Indeed, I have two war grave locations in my own constituency. The commission employs more than 1,300 staff worldwide; have two war grave locations in my own constituency. Negotiations are also ongoing with the Ministry of Defence to include non-war related graves in the work of the commission.

Staff of the commission take pride in attending to the war graves. It is not just a job, but a way of life and a vocation. Many are from families who have worked for the commission for generations, and many spend their whole working lives in the service of the commission. The Commission can range from gardeners, maintenance and stonemasons to administrators, supervisors, managers, archivists and historians. It is not uncommon for staff to progress through a variety of those roles in the course of their career, re-training and adapting to the needs of the job. There is often a large element of foreign travel and the work can entail working and living abroad for years and even decades; requiring staff to uproot families and learn new languages to adjust. That can for years and even decades; requiring staff to uproot families and learn new languages to adjust.

Defence to include non-war related graves in the work of the commission. There is often a large element of foreign travel and the work can entail working and living abroad for years and even decades; requiring staff to uproot families and learn new languages to adjust. That can for years and even decades; requiring staff to uproot families and learn new languages to adjust.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission cares for more than 1,700,000 casualties of the first and second world wars in cemeteries and memorials at more than 23,000 locations in over 150 countries. Indeed, I have two war grave locations in my own constituency. Negotiations are also ongoing with the Ministry of Defence to include non-war related graves in the work of the commission.

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Salaries at the commission have never been very modest. A recent Towers Watson global grading and pay review found a need to uprate salaries, leading to most getting an increase of between 1% and 1.5%, or a 1.5% lump sum. Those on the lowest grade were given a minimum £450 increase. Although that is welcome, it nevertheless reflects the fact that salaries over the years have not been commensurate with the job. However, despite some of the sacrifices, staff at the commission remain committed to delivering a high level of service. Most recently, the commemorations of the first world war have required staff to work over and above their normal commitments.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to the House. The number of Members present in the Chamber is an indication of the importance of the subject. In my constituency, we have between 60 and 70 war graves, which are looked after by the War Graves Commission, and they are very important to us in Strangford. What concerns me is the need to have the pensions and the wages correct across the whole of the Commonwealth, not just in the United Kingdom. Does he think that we should look after those graves in the Commonwealth as well as in other parts of the world?

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I agree with him.

To recognise the special nature of the job, the loyalty of staff and the financial sacrifices staff have made over the years, the commission has held a final salary pension scheme, ensuring financial security for staff who have spent their lives in dedicated service to the commission. The terms of this scheme are good with a low employee contribution, a spouse’s pension, death in service and lump sums based on final salary—40/60ths. That reflects the fact that the pension has traditionally been one of the most important conditions of service, recognising years of dedication and loyalty.

In December 2014, however, the CWGC announced the intention to close the final salary pension scheme in April 2016 and move staff to a far less favourable defined contribution scheme, the Group Pension Plan. The terms of this scheme are much higher employee contribution, lower employer contribution and less of a pension pot at the end. The changes will see a drastic reduction in the pensions of 180 long-serving staff, with some losing more than £6,000 for every year that they draw their pension. The introduction of the new pension will also see a reduction in employer contributions from the current 22.4% of salary to a limit of “up to 15%”. On average, employer contributions will likely be much lower as the 15% rate can be reached only when employees significantly increase their contributions in turn. That came just two years after the Commonwealth War Graves Commission had closed the final salary scheme to new entrants, promising: “Closure of the scheme to new members does not have a negative impact on the funding of the existing pension scheme...The current pension scheme remains in a relatively strong surplus position when assets and liabilities are calculated on a long term actuarial basis.”

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a profound speech that chimes with some of the history books that I have read. He is right that the Government will find a lot of money for weapons, but they find less money for the wounded, and it is disappointing and sad that for the dead there is less money still. The facts that my hon. Friend is discussing go contrary to the sweet words that are often said about remembering and honouring the dead in Chambers such as this.

Chris Stephens: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I shall come on to say more about the position of the scheme.

The news of the closure of the final salary scheme has come as a terrible shock to long-serving staff, with more than 50% of those affected within 10 years of normal retirement age, leaving little time to readjust. For some, that has meant completely changing retirement plans as they can no longer afford to retire or as key assumptions such as being able to pay off a mortgage are no longer the case. Staff feel betrayed that what was promised to them for years is suddenly being snatched away.

Let us consider the financial position. In the commission’s statement of accounts of March 2014, the key numbers show a surplus of £1.4 million on income of £67 million, with balance sheet reserves up from £4.3 million to £7.2 million and net current assets up from £1.5 million to £2.2 million. The balance sheet shows an improvement in reserves of £2.9 million, due largely to the improvement of £2.6 million in the pension deficit from £8.3 million to £5.7 million. In its 2015 accounts, the position had changed. The balance sheet showed a deficit of £6.1 million, having been in surplus by £6.7 million in March 2014. The reason was a sharp increase in the deficit shown in the pension scheme, a deterioration of £13 million in the year, taking the deficit to £18.6 million. The background is the effect of the recent three-yearly valuation, which reflected a collapse in the forecast interest rates for the pension fund investments.

My first question to the Minister is: what investments resulted in this change from 2014 to 2015? Despite the commission announcing its intention to close the pension scheme in December 2014, formal consultation with the three trade unions representing staff at the commission—PCS, Prospect and Unite—did not start until June 2015. During the consultation period, the trade unions took a reasoned and helpful approach, proposing numerous alternatives in an attempt to find a solution that both recognised the financial position of the commission and mitigated the most detrimental effects on staff. However, the commission rejected all the proposals, remaining resolute on closing the final salary scheme and moving to a defined contribution scheme.

Proposals were numerous and wide reaching and included increasing member contributions to enable the scheme to stay open. The initial proposal put forward by the trade union side, a proposal that directly addressed the commission’s concerns about the pension scheme deficit and about future risk in the scheme, was as follows. First, it proposed a cap on pensionable earnings for future service with effect from 1 April 2016, which would immediately address the pension scheme deficit by enabling a downward revision of the actuarial costs of the scheme. Secondly, it proposed to increase member contributions from 1.5% to 5%, phased in the next two years. Thirdly, it suggested that the decision on the closure of the scheme should be postponed for three years, linked to a further valuation of the scheme during 2018. That would enable a considered and measured review of the scheme’s funding, taking account of the previous two proposed measures, both of which would have a positive impact on past service deficit and future service costs. These proposals were rejected almost immediately, with no costing done by the commission, leading the trade unions to believe that the consultation was hollow and the commission was intent on closing the final salary scheme regardless.

The final proposal from the trade unions was the option of CWGC UK-based staff transferring to the civil service Alpha pension scheme, as provided for under the Cabinet Office’s new fair deal. We are aware that...
many scheduled bodies including English Heritage, the Churches Conservation Trust, the Royal Botanic Gardens, the Imperial War Museum and the British Council have been permitted to join the new civil service pension scheme.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the Adjournment debate tonight and I hear what he says, but what he has just suggested was considered. It was not possible, and if people had been transferred to the civil service scheme, the terms offered to them would have been worse.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He has spoken to me about that privately and I have asked questions about it. His comments are surprising because of the aggregate accrual rates in the Alpha scheme. One of the problems is that there has been no discussion of the actuarial variations between the trade unions and those representing the commission in the talks. I hope the hon. Gentleman will use his good offices to put that right.

The commission’s response was to assert that CWGC staff are not civil servants, making them ineligible to join the Alpha scheme. However, the Office for National Statistics details the CWGC as part of the MOD accounts, and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs also lists CWGC staff as civil servants. In fact, the CWGC tends to pick and choose when the civil service hat fits. For example, the 1% pay cap in the public sector is often cited in pay talks as a reason to keep down pay rises.

The trade unions believe that they were never given a satisfactory reason why the CWGC did not apply for admittance as a scheduled body under the Government’s new fair deal policy. Instead of putting forward a case for staff to join Alpha, the commission seemed to decide in advance that they were ineligible to join and then sought confirmation of this from the MOD. The commission’s unwillingness to engage and seek alternatives that would mitigate the financial impact on staff was demonstrated throughout the consultation.

Trade unions repeatedly asked for more information to inform the consultation and aid the consideration of alternatives. However, the commission declined to offer that information, and the trade unions had to conduct much of the consultation without key information. For example, they requested an anonymised breakdown of how the new scheme would financially affect each member of staff; crucial information that would allow unions to see the impact of the proposals and help them put forward alternatives. That request was declined, leaving the unions no option but to ask members to send in their individual statements and to piece them together to form an overall picture.

Staff representatives were denied access to key decision making meetings at which they had requested the opportunity to put forward the case to keep the scheme open. The unions wrote to the commission asking to attend the meeting on 9 December 2015 when the commission put forward its case for closing the scheme to the board of commissioners. The commission wrote back to say that the unions’ attendance would be “inappropriate”.

Despite the trade unions raising numerous concerns and offering reasonable alternatives, the decision to close the final salary scheme appears to have been a fait accompli. The commission made the final decision in December 2015 to go ahead and close the scheme in April 2016. As staff have mentioned, the pension scheme has always been a way of attracting and retaining staff in the commission, and it has featured strongly as part of the overall benefits package that staff have signed up to when joining. To take it away after years of service, when staff are so painfully near retirement, is just unfair. Long-serving staff have put up with great disturbance and sacrifice to their family lives, such as moving to foreign countries. Spouses and partners have often been unable to have careers as a result, and the pension that commission staff accrue should recognise that.

Approximately 60% of those affected by the changes are 50 years old or more, so they could be retiring within the next 10 years. Staff within a few years of retirement now have little time to re-adjust their financial planning for retirement, as the alternative Group Pension Plan will not deliver anything like the benefits of the final salary scheme. When changes were made to the civil service pension schemes, protection was given to staff nearing retirement, in recognition of the fact that they would have made financial plans based on the assumption of their existing pension entitlement. That protection has not been offered to staff at the commission.

Closure of the scheme from 1 April 2016 will have a significant detrimental effect on the future pensions of UK-based staff and will cause considerable unrest among employees at a time when they are working hard to further enhance the reputation of the commission with the work on the 1914 to 1918 centenary commemorations. The changes also come at the exact time when workers currently contracted out of the state second pension, as staff in the commission are, will see national insurance contribution increases of 1.4%. From April 2016, staff transferring to the GPP scheme will therefore have the dual disadvantage of paying national insurance increases and pension contribution increases of up to 5% for the new scheme. Closing the final salary pension scheme will create financial difficulty for the commission’s longest-serving, loyal staff, who have sacrificed much for the commission over the years.

The trade unions believe that they have adopted a constructive approach to finding alternatives. However, the commission has refused to make any meaningful changes to its initial position to mitigate the financial impact on staff.

Mr Kevan Jones: I do not want to get into a dialogue about this, but I have to say that that is not true. The final scheme was changed, including to help lower-paid staff over the next three years, so changes have been made. I also have to say that I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s description of the negotiations, because the trade unions did meet the vice-chair and the secretary-general.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am sure that is a discussion he and I can continue to have.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. First, has the decision to close the scheme already been made or is it the case that, in the words of the Leader of the House in a letter to me on 24 February 2016: “The Commission has undertaken a consultation and is now considering in detail the range of responses received but no decision has yet been taken”?
Secondly, what is the current deficit of the scheme, as of today’s date? Lastly, given what I have outlined in relation to industrial and employee relations, does he not agree that we should ensure that talks begin between the commission and the trade unions—hopefully with ministerial involvement—to share information and actuarial evidence properly and to reach a solution that could be agreed by both sides?

10.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing the debate. I must confess that I find myself in a slightly difficult position, because I have no direct responsibility for this issue, for reasons that I will explain. However, I am determined, as ever, to help in any way I can. Although the hon. Gentleman has asked a number of detailed questions, some of which I hope to be able to address this evening, I will of course write to him in due course about any that I am unable to answer, having approached the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on his behalf.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): I declare an interest as a parliamentary commissioner on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing the debate, which of course was based, quite naturally, largely on submissions from the trade unions. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that it is very difficult for him to respond to this debate, because the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is independent and its funding comes not only from the United Kingdom, but from half a dozen other Commonwealth countries? I have to say that my impression, through my fellow commissioner, the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), who has been involved in the negotiations, is that the commission has bent over backwards, and in very difficult financial circumstances.

Mark Lancaster: Indeed. That is what I was trying very gently to say. None the less, I am keen to help. In fact, the two parliamentary commissioners, sitting on either side of the House, are in many respects much closer to the issue than I am.

The pension arrangements of the commission’s employees are ultimately a matter for the commission’s senior management and for trustees of the scheme. The concerns of the hon. Member for Glasgow South West should, in the first instance, rightly be directed to the commission, which, it must be emphasised, is not even a UK-run organisation, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) said. None the less, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate, not least so that I can pay tribute to the commission for its work before I get on to the issue of pensions.

I am sure that, like me, many hon. Members will have visited one or more of the cemeteries and memorials that are so well cared for by the commission. It is certainly true to say that the commission provides the gold standard in care and that the sites under its care, wherever they may be, are always as well and as lovingly cared for as possible.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: I am not going to give way, because I am going to run out of time. The hon. Lady will have to forgive me.

I have been privileged to visit several sites in recent years, including in northern France and on Ascension Island. I have also visited Stanley cemetery in the Falklands, with the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), and Stanley cemetery in Hong Kong, which is without doubt one of the most striking cemeteries in the world, with its views over Stanley harbour. I often sat there to reflect during my service in Hong Kong.

It would be beneficial to remind ourselves of the origins of the commission. As hon. Members might be aware, it was established by royal charter on 21 May 1917. The provisions were then extended by a supplemental charter on 8 June 1964. In accordance with its royal charter, the commission has the task of commemorating the Commonwealth war dead of the two world wars by making fit provision in perpetuity for their graves and memorials, and of maintaining records of the dead.

The commission ensures that 1.7 million people who died in the two world wars will never be forgotten, and it cares for cemeteries and memorials at 23,000 locations in 154 countries. It is worth pointing out that, within the United Kingdom, it helps us to commemorate more than 300,000 Commonwealth servicemen and women, with their graves numbering 170,000 in more than 13,000 locations across the country.

I would like to take this opportunity to point hon. Members to the commission’s website, which, among other things, details the locations of the more than 140,000 graves that it tends in the UK. People tend to think of the commission in terms of precise ranks of graves in cemeteries on the western front, but there is hardly a town anywhere in the country, let alone a constituency, that does not contain at least one grave tended by the commission.

In this year, when we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the battle of the Somme, it is particularly poignant to remember that those graves and memorials allow us to connect with not just the conflicts of the past, but the people caught up in those conflicts. That reminds us of the cost of such conflicts and of the individuals who paid the ultimate price, and it gives us a very human connection with history.

As I mentioned at the start of my speech, the commission is not a UK-run organisation. Its cost is shared by the member Governments, consisting of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom, in proportions based on the number of their graves. That results in the UK contributing almost 80% of the total funding, which was in excess of £47 million in 2015. In addition, the Ministry of Defence provides £1.3 million to the commission for the cost of maintaining 20,000 Boer war graves in South Africa and a further 21,000 non-world war graves around the world.

The commission’s day-to-day operations are overseen by the vice-chairman, Air Chief Marshal Sir Joe French; the high commissioners of member Governments; and eight commissioners drawn from the armed forces, the two largest UK political parties—currently those two commissioners are the hon. Member for North Durham.

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and my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland—and individuals who bring particular knowledge and experience.

Turning to the issue at hand—the pension fund of employees of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission—I need to be clear that, as an independent Commonwealth body established by royal charter, the commission has no requirement on it to consult Her Majesty’s Government on day-to-day operational matters, including the terms and conditions of its UK workforce. However, as a key stakeholder in the commission, the MOD was consulted on the issue and agreed with the decision to consult about the closure of the scheme.

Formal consultation on commission pensions commenced on 8 June 2015. The commission met the trade unions representing UK employees on five occasions and wrote on a further three occasions, providing detailed responses to alternative proposals that were put forward. I can confirm that all the trade union proposals were costed by the commission’s actuarial advisers, so they were certainly not dismissed out of hand.

The consultation period was extended by two weeks at the request of the trade unions to accommodate annual leave commitments. It closed on 14 September 2015 without agreement being reached. Subsequent to the consultation period, further meetings with the trade unions took place on 23 November and 4 December 2015. Following the consultation, the commission has agreed to the closure of the superannuation scheme with effect from 31 March 2016, and has agreed that members will be automatically enrolled into the commission’s alternative group personal pension scheme with a period of enhanced contributions.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Lancaster: Of course, but I am running out of time.

Chris Stephens: What the Minister says seems to be in direct contradiction with the letter I have from the Leader of the House, which says that no final decision has been made. Can he comment on that?

Mark Lancaster: I am happy to clarify that. The members of the scheme will have been notified of the closure, as have the trades unions and trustees. Crucially, I understand that the decision was taken against the background of a 60% increase in the cost of the scheme since 2005, a growing scheme deficit, and a further increase in funding stemming from the 2014 statutory valuation of the scheme. The commission has made it clear that it is unable to meet the additional costs of approximately £1 million a year without a detrimental impact on its core task of commemoration. It is clear that the only way to make such savings would be to place many jobs at risk, as the vast majority of its budget is spent on horticultural labour. As the commission is an organisation funded by six Commonwealth nations, its UK employees represent less than a quarter of its workforce of 1,250. The closure of the superannuation scheme has an impact on approximately 180 of those employees, whose terms and conditions of employment are ultimately a matter for the commission, not the Government.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission’s funding has been maintained over many years, and this Government have recognised in the House its important and sacred mission. I am sure that hon. Members will join me in commending the commission for its outstanding and vital work. However, I must reiterate that the issue of pensions for the commission’s employees is one for the commission and its trustees rather than the Government. I understand the concerns that have been raised in this debate, and a couple of outstanding questions need to be answered. I am happy to engage with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on behalf of the hon. Gentleman, and I will write to him in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

10.36 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 1 March 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Oil and Gas Industry

1. Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the oil and gas industry. [903815]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): This Government are clear that the broad shoulders of the United Kingdom are 100% behind our oil and gas industry and the thousands of families it supports. Last March, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a wide-ranging fiscal package, including reducing the headline rates of tax and a new investment allowance, further expanded at the summer Budget to drive investment and support maximising economic recovery.

Stuart Blair Donaldson: Oil and Gas UK has highlighted that headline tax rates of 50%, or 67.5% for companies paying petroleum revenue tax, are no longer sustainable. As the UK continental shelf enters an ever more mature phase, and the oil price remains lower for longer, the fiscal burden needs to reflect these changing circumstances and to be permanently reduced. Will the Government listen to the industry, and what fiscal support will they bring forward for the oil and gas industry in this year’s Budget?

Damian Hinds: In the “Driving investment” paper, the Government absolutely recognise the need over time to change the fiscal structure. The scale of what my right hon. Friend did reflects the fact that the figure stood at £1.3 billion. The most recent of the headline tax reductions took effect on 1 January this year.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I echo these points. The North sea oil and gas industry is facing very serious challenges at this time. Working with the industry and the Oil and Gas Authority, the Treasury can help to overcome the problems. May I urge the Minister to include in the Budget tax-cutting initiatives and support that build on last year’s measures and help to attract investment to this basin and to ease the worries of many very worried people?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend highlights the fact that many jobs supported by the sector are in England as well as in Scotland. I commend the work he has been doing with New Anglia local enterprise partnership on supporting companies that have found themselves in difficulties, working particularly on skills and so on. I assure him that we continue to listen to the industry, to the Oil and Gas Authority, to Oil and Gas UK, and to many individual companies to see what more can be done to support this vital sector.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): OGN in North Tyneside has now shed all its 2,000 jobs. The company has been in touch with the Government to ask for help with a rather difficult contract to develop wind farms, but as yet has heard nothing about any help that can be given. Will the Minister see whether there is going to be any help, or will he meet me and representatives of OGN for the sake of these jobs?

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Lady. I would of course be very happy to meet her and the company to see what proposal it would put forward.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): An application for shale gas exploration in my constituency may result in many millions of pounds in community benefits. Does the Minister agree that those community benefits should go to the communities most affected by development?

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said that the shale wealth fund could deliver up to £1 billion of benefits to communities hosting shale gas development. This is in addition to the existing industry scheme. My hon. Friend is entirely right that it is important that communities see those benefits and have the reassurance of additionality.

European Union

2. Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on the economy of the UK leaving the EU. [903816]

12. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential effect on the economy of the UK leaving the EU. [903826]

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): My responsibility as Chancellor is for jobs, livelihoods and living standards. It is clear to me that a UK exit from the EU would be a long, costly and messy divorce that would hurt all those things. We have already seen sterling fall, and yesterday HSBC predicted a further 15% to 20% slump in the event of a vote to leave. The finance Ministers and central bank governors of the G20 concluded at the weekend that a British exit would cause an economic shock not just to the UK but to Europe and the world. What people are asking for in this referendum campaign is a serious, sober and principled assessment from the Government setting out the facts. I can announce today that the Treasury will publish before 23 June a comprehensive analysis of our membership of a reformed...
EU and the alternatives, including the long-term economic costs and benefits of EU membership and the risks associated with an exit.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Given that up to 140,000 jobs and half of the north-east region’s exports rely on Britain’s membership of the European Union, does the Chancellor agree with me and the majority of members of the North East chamber of commerce that an exit from the EU would be extremely damaging for north-east economic growth and regeneration?

Mr Osborne: Yes, I agree with both the hon. Lady and businesses in the north-east. Of course, the north-east has thrived by attracting big inward investment for car manufacturing and train manufacturing, most recently in Newton Aycliffe. One of the things that those who are advocating exit from the EU have to answer is, for example, what the alternative arrangement is for a large car factory in north-east England. Could it export its cars to mainland Europe without tariffs? It is not obvious that it is possible to do that without paying towards the EU budget and accepting the free movement of people.

Nic Dakin: Will the UK steel industry have a brighter future if we remain in the EU or if we leave the EU?

Mr Osborne: I believe that the best way to help the UK steel industry is both to take action at home and through being part of a large economic bloc—in other words, the European Union—raising our concerns about, for example, Chinese steel dumping. Frankly, when we make that argument with China, our voice will be amplified if we make it as part of the EU as opposed to making it alone.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): In the event of a no vote, the Government have committed themselves to triggering article 50 straight away. I cannot see the point of that. Why do not the Government give some time between a no vote and the triggering of article 50, to enable a discussion to take place with counterparts and see the extent to which good faith could be established with the countries of the European Union? It seems illogical to restrict ourselves in that way.

Mr Osborne: It is not illogical that if the country votes to leave, we leave the European Union. That is the choice for the people of this country. The only available mechanism is the triggering of article 50, which gives a two-year time limit. Of course, we would try to negotiate in good faith and an extension can be achieved, but only with the consent of 27 other nations. People need to be aware that there are not going to be two referendums. It is decision day on 23 June. People need to choose and I think that voting to remain in the EU is the best outcome for our economic and national security.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Is it not extraordinary that the Chancellor asked the G20 to make that statement, and is it not the case that he made that request so that it could tee up this element of “Project Fear”?

Mr Osborne: The idea that the US Treasury Secretary, the head of the International Monetary Fund and, indeed, the Governor of the Central Bank of China dance to a British tune is, I am afraid, fanciful. Governors of central banks and the Finance Ministers of the G20 are saying the same thing as every major independent economic institution: that a British exit would cause an immediate economic shock and have longer economic costs. I totally understand why many of the people advocating exit want to do so, but, to be frank, they accept that there would be a short-term and potentially long-term economic cost. We should have that on the table, which is why the Treasury is going to produce its analysis.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): Despite the recent gulag debacle, does the Chancellor agree that UK membership of the European Union should make it easier to clamp down on immoral tax avoidance by multinational companies?

Mr Osborne: I know that Russia Today is the favoured channel of the Labour leadership, but this is Treasury questions. We are raising with the European Union—this is another example of where being part of a bigger club helps—the possibility of getting a pan-European agreement for country-by-country public reporting so that we can see what multinational companies are paying in different countries. Of course, our ability to achieve that is amplified by being part of the EU.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): If my right hon. Friend’s rather apocalyptic view of our leaving the European Union is correct, was it not irresponsible and inaccurate of the Prime Minister to say that he ruled nothing out prior to the completion of the most unsatisfactory renegotiation?

Mr Osborne: We have secured a renegotiation that I think addresses the principal British concerns about our membership of the European Union, and now we can advocate membership of this reformed EU. I think we will be stronger, safer and better off in that European Union.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Between 2007 and 2013, more than 8,000 businesses in the north-west were able to start up, thanks to EU funding. I welcome the Chancellor’s comments this morning about the analysis that he will put forward before 23 June. Will that include specific detail about the impact of leaving the EU on the economy of the north-west?

Mr Osborne: I am happy to take on board the hon. Lady’s request about the impact that an exit would have on the north-west of England. I am a north-west MP, and I know that many businesses in the north-west have access to that big free trade single market, which is the largest market in the world. All the alternatives on offer, whether we go for the approaches taken in Norway, Switzerland, Canada or the World Trade Organisation—of course, those who advocate withdrawal have not been able to settle on one approach—would involve some kind of barrier to entry, or we would have to pay into the EU budget, as Norway does, and accept free movement of people, which is one of the complaints about EU membership. Examining the alternatives, as we will do in the coming days, will throw a spotlight on the choice facing the country.
Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Should the British people decide to vote leave on 23 June, what arguments would the Chancellor deploy on 24 June in favour of the United Kingdom to attract investors and encourage them to invest in the United Kingdom rather than in other countries in Europe?

Mr Osborne: I will always fight, and the Government will always fight, for the best interests of the United Kingdom, and we will do whatever we can in response to the verdict of the people. My recommendation, and the recommendation of the British Government, is that we are better off in the reformed EU—

Mr Evans: I did not ask that.

Mr Osborne: The point I make to my hon. Friend is that, of course, we will have to handle the situation if the British people choose to exit, and I would always want to stress that we are a great country to invest in, but I think that that argument will be weaker if we are not in the EU.

Mr Speaker: We are deeply grateful, but we must try to attend to the questions asked, and to do so in a timely way, because progress is desperately slow. Members can do better than that; one would hope.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Would there not be a double whammy if Britain left the EU? First, there is the widely predicted risk of depreciation, which will lead to higher interest rates. Secondly, any notion that our exporters would benefit from a cheaper pound is more than offset by the additional tariff barriers that those firms would encounter worldwide.

Mr Osborne: The former shadow Chancellor is right to point to both the immediate economic shock, which I think is generally accepted—even those who, for perfectly honourable reasons, advocate withdrawal, accept that there would be an immediate economic dislocation—and the longer-term costs. If we tell Britain to make this leap in the dark, we have to be able to answer the question: what is the alternative? How do we reassure the car manufacturer in north-east England that tariffs will not be imposed on its cars, as a result of which it will not be so competitive and there will not be so many jobs in its factory? Those are the questions for this big national debate.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Those who wish us to stay in the European Union say on the one hand that we are an insignificant economy and too small to stand on our own, but on the other hand that if we leave the European Union it will cause an economic meltdown around the world. They cannot both be true, Chancellor.

Mr Osborne: Our argument is that we will be stronger and better off inside the European Union. That is the positive choice that we face as a country. I, personally, do not think that we should leave the EU, but even those who contemplate doing so should think about this. With the economic situation that the world faces at the moment, and with the geopolitical situation that we face in Europe with Putin on our doorstep and the crisis in the middle east, is this the right moment to leave? My strong advice, the advice of the British Cabinet and the advice of the British Government is that we remain in this reformed EU.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): The Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was in London yesterday making the case for the UK to remain in the EU. She made the point that access to that market supports some 300,000 jobs in Scotland and some 3 million jobs in the UK. May I ask the Chancellor to agree with me—I am sure he will—that in terms of EU membership, trade deals are easier to agree as a bloc, harmonised regulation helps businesses to export and, notwithstanding the fact that improvements can always be made, being a member of the EU benefits consumers as well?

Mr Osborne: I agree that Scotland benefits from both being part of the United Kingdom and being part of the European Union. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that EU agreements on things such as air travel and mobile phone charges have reduced costs for consumers. It is also the case that a depreciation in sterling leads to increased inflation.

Stewart Hosie: The extent to which the EU has succeeded is actually quite remarkable in terms of free trade, free movement—we think it is a boon—and, indeed, the commensurate protections for the environment, social protection and employment rights. These substantial achievements of the European Union are to be celebrated, not renounced. That is the positive case we are making. May I urge the Chancellor and his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to make a positive case, because the in campaign does not have a 20-point lead to squander with a negative campaign?

Mr Osborne: I am making the positive case that we will be stronger, safer and better off, which are all positive outcomes for our country, and I am pointing out that there are question marks over the alternatives. It is perfectly reasonable to point out that we do not know what the leap in the dark would entail, but of course I want to do this in a positive way. There is a healthy debate across our political system as well as across our country, but I take the view of Ronald Reagan’s 11th commandment, which is that “I won’t speak ill of a Conservative.”

National Living Wage

3. Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the national living wage on wage growth.

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): The national living wage will mean that a full-time minimum-wage worker benefiting from the policy will earn over £4,000 more by 2020 in cash terms, a rise of more than 35%. Due to the ripple effects on those on higher incomes, up to 6 million workers will benefit. The national living wage will drive up productivity; it will make sure that work pays; it is progressive and fair; and I am proud it is being introduced by a Conservative Government.

Royston Smith: I thank the Chancellor for his response. I am delighted that the national living wage will come into force from 1 April because Southampton has a
Mr Osborne: The assurance I can give is that, alongside the national living wage, we have cut taxes for businesses so that they have more money to invest in their workforce. We have introduced and increased the employment allowance, which helps small businesses in particular. I introduced that increase at the same time as announcing the national living wage. We are of course making big investments in the Southampton economy so that it is a great place to grow a business and employ people. All those things will help the hard-working people my hon. Friend represents so well.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Wage growth matters, but surely it is the bottom line of your payslip that really counts. That is why the Chancellor is wrong to say that this is progressive. The Resolution Foundation has found that, over the next Parliament, those in the top half of our income distribution will benefit more than those at the bottom. How can the Chancellor say that what he has done will help those with the least?

Mr Osborne: The hon. Lady seems to be opposing the national living wage. I think it is a progressive policy. Indeed, it was based on work by the Resolution Foundation. If you want a regressive policy, I will give you one. How about increasing the basic rate of income tax? That is what the Labour party is proposing in Scotland—the first sign of what an economic policy would look like under this new Labour leadership. How can an increase in the basic rate of income tax, which would hit people earning over £11,000, be remotely progressive or fair?

22. [903838] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Most businesses, as well as workers, in my constituency warmly welcome the introduction of the national living wage and the increased spending power it will deliver. Will the Chancellor and his team carefully monitor the implementation of the national living wage to see whether there are any unintended consequences, particularly in sectors where margins are already small, such as farming, social care and hospitality?

Mr Osborne: We will of course monitor the impact of all our policies on the economy and on particular sectors. That is one of the reasons why, alongside introducing the national living wage, we have introduced the new council tax supplement for the social care sector. The Office for Budget Responsibility analysis when we announced the national living wage was that, while in theory 60,000 jobs could be lost in the future that might otherwise have been created, the other policies we were pursuing would see over 1 million new jobs created, so the overall effect is an increase in employment of over 1 million.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): How can the Treasury ensure that employers do not reduce the hours of work of their employees, many of whom are in receipt of low incomes?

Mr Osborne: Many employer organisations and businesses have welcomed the national living wage, and many studies suggest that having a higher floor for wages drives up productivity, which, as the hon. Lady will know, is one of Britain’s great economic challenges.

Charter for Budget Responsibility

4. Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): What progress has been made on implementing the charter for budget responsibility.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands): As part of our long-term economic plan, the Government’s charter for budget responsibility was approved by Parliament on 15 October 2015. The charter sets a path to this country’s long-term financial health and to a surplus. Unlike other parties in this House, we will be strong and consistent in our support for the charter. The Budget is on 16 March.

Mark Garnier: In 2010, the budget deficit stood at 11.1% of GDP. This year, it is set to be down by two thirds at 3.9% of GDP, which is a remarkable achievement given the economic headwinds coming from outside the UK. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what discussions he is having with other parties, in particular those on the shadow Front Bench, about how to reduce the budget deficit and turn it into a surplus, and are they proving to be helpful?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for our budget reduction efforts. I have had no such discussions so far, nor any submissions from those on the Opposition Front Bench. I have, however, received a submission from Ed Balls’s former head of policy, Karim Palant, who said of the shadow Chancellor’s changing position on the charter: “This kind of chaos less than a month into the job is the kind of blow even significant political figures struggle to recover from.”

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I agree that we need to reduce the debt and the deficit, but with interest rates at record lows and the International Monetary Fund forecasting that public and private investment will fall from 30th to 31st in the OECD league table, should we not be taking advantage of low interest rates to invest in our creaking infrastructure, airport capacity, road and rail, and flood defences?

Greg Hands: I welcome the hon. Lady’s support for deficit reduction. It is good to have her back. I must remind her, however, that in the last Parliament she voted against virtually every single deficit reduction measure the Government took. We have a big programme of infrastructure investment worth £100 billion over the course of this Parliament, which includes transport infrastructure and other measures that will help her constituents and people across the country.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): As the IMF has just been mentioned, does the Chief Secretary agree that its statement last week that we have “delivered robust growth, record high employment, a significant reduction in fiscal deficits, and increased financial sector resilience”
is all good news that we should be welcoming? There is more to be done and I wonder whether he is looking forward to the pearls of wisdom that might come from the Opposition, now that they have the benefit of Mr Varoufakis.

**Greg Hands:** The IMF has been clear in its endorsement of the charter for budget responsibility:

“The transparency of the new rule— with a focus on headline balances and a simple and well-defined escape clause in the event of very low growth—is welcome.”

It goes on to commend us on having the “appropriate level of flexibility” in the charter. In respect of any external advisers that are taken on by the Labour party, it would appear from *The Sun* this morning that Labour MPs are extremely unhappy—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Sit down. It is a terrible waste of time—long-winded, boring and unnecessary.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): In the debates at the time of the charter, I and many others warned the Chancellor of the potential impact of global adverse headwinds. The Chancellor responded by boasting “of having an economic plan that actually produces better results than were forecast”.—[Official Report, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1385.]

Since then, we have seen business investment fall, his export target recede into the distance, the trade deficit widen, manufacturing and construction enter recession, and the biggest productivity gap for a generation. Last week, to crown it all, the Chancellor told us the economy is smaller than we thought. I say to him that if his economic plan is now producing worse results than forecast, imposing more stealth taxes and cuts in the Budget will only—

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. We need a question mark. Order, order. I said what I said because Ministers are responsible for answering for Government policy, not that of the Opposition. People who ask questions, be they from the Front or the Back Bench, must do so pithily. A pithy reply, Chief Secretary.

**Greg Hands:** All forecasts at the moment still show the UK performing extremely well, with strong rates of growth compared with other G7 countries. The Chancellor was right to say over the weekend that we may need to undertake further reductions in spending because this country can afford only what it can afford. He went on to say:

“I'm absolutely determined that first and foremost in this uncertain time we have economic security. That's what people rely on.”

I am equally clear that it would be a fundamental disaster for this country if we pursued the policies that the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) has been promoting in the six months that he has been shadow Chancellor.

**John McDonnell:** Can we address one of the domestic threats to our economy? This week the former Governor of the Bank of England warned that bankers have not learned the lessons from 2008, and without reform of the financial system, another crisis is certain. Will the Chancellor take responsibility for the domestic vulnerabilities within our economy that have built up under his watch? Will he withdraw his proposals to water down the regulatory regime for senior bankers?

**Greg Hands:** I remind the shadow Chancellor that, over the past five and a half years, this Government have been fixing the problems in our banking system, after the poor regulation and tripartite regime that we inherited from the previous Government. We have been taking action. On economic policy, I just have to look around at the Labour party and see what kind of reactions there are.

**Mr Speaker:** Sit down. This is about Government policy, and progress is slower than at previous Treasury questions. The Minister should try to stick to Government policy, upon which briefly he can, and should, speak.

**First-time Homebuyers**

5. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to help first-time homebuyers.

**The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer** (Mr George Osborne): The Government want to make home ownership a reality for as many people as possible, which is why we are building 400,000 new homes and have extended Help to Buy. Our new Help to Buy ISA, launched a year ago at the Budget, is already being used by almost one third of a million families to save for their first home—confirmation that the Conservative Government are on the side of home ownership.

**Huw Merriman:** Recent figures show that 82% of buyers who used Help to Buy would not have been able to buy their home without that scheme. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Conservatives are helping hard-working people to realise their dreams of home ownership? Is he aware of alternative economic policies and the risk that they pose to families in my constituency?

**Mr Osborne:** My hon. Friend is right, and 130,000 people have made use of our Help to Buy scheme, which has helped people in his constituency and elsewhere to get on the housing ladder. At the same time, we are seeking to increase supply by building more homes for people to buy. First-time buyers were down by more than 50% under the previous Labour Government, but they are up by 60% with us.

**Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor makes great claim for his policy, but in inner-London in my constituency, housing is a real crisis. This morning I met the head of our clinical commissioning group. We have a crisis in GP recruitment and in hospital doctor appointments. Even highly paid doctors cannot afford to get on the housing ladder in my constituency, and that is causing a crisis in public services. What will he do about that?

**Mr Osborne:** We are doing two things about that. First, we are building more homes in London than were ever built under the previous Labour Government, and we have also just introduced Help to Buy London, so that we help Londoners deal with the very high cost of housing in the capital.
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): After six years as Chancellor, will the right hon. Gentleman confirm whether home ownership went up or down between 2010 and 2015?

Mr Osborne: When I first became Chancellor we were in the aftermath of a collapse in the housing market, so it took a couple of years to get house building going again. House building starts are now up, and the number of first-time buyers has risen by 60% since I became Chancellor. It was down by 50% under the last Labour Government.

Seema Malhotra: There you have it, Mr Speaker. We know from the English housing survey that 201,000 fewer households owned a home in 2015 than five years ago, compared with an increase of 1 million under Labour. By 2025, nine out of 10 Britons under 35 on modest incomes will not be able to afford a home. Rents in the private sector are soaring, and the housing benefit bill is likely to be £350 million more than the Chancellor forecast last year. Is his record on housing investment one of failure, with British families now literally paying the price?

Mr Osborne: Housing starts are higher than they were when I became the Chancellor, but what people need—homeowners or people who are building houses—above all is economic security, which is what the Government are seeking to deliver. Frankly, the fact that the Labour party is now getting its advice from Yanis Varoufakis and the revolutionary Marxist broadcaster Paul Mason does not suggest to me that it has an answer to economic security. Presumably Labour chose those two because Chairman Mao was dead and Micky Mouse was busy.

Tax Disputes


The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): Tax treaties provide protection for UK citizens from discriminatory taxation in other countries. The UK has one of the largest treaty networks, with more than 120 treaties in force. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs cannot intervene where a taxpayer is in dispute with a foreign revenue authority on a domestic issue. However, where a UK resident believes that a treaty partner is not applying the treaty properly, they can request HMRC to raise the issue with the other revenue authority.

Neil Gray: I thank the Minister for that helpful answer. My constituent David Duncan is currently being pursued by HMRC’s mutual assistance in the recovery of debt team for a tax payment relating to a time when he was residing in Germany but working in South Korea. Mr Duncan had been assured by his employer that he would have to—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry but this is just too long. This is a story, not a question. One sentence. What is it?

Mr Osborne: As I said in my answer, it depends on the nature of the dispute, but if the hon. Gentleman wishes to write to me, I will look at it and get back to him.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Spirits Duty

7. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effects on the economy of the reduction in duty on spirits announced in the 2015 Budget.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): The 2% duty cut at the March Budget 2015 continues to support the 296,000 people across the sector, including such distilleries as Highland Park in the right hon. Gentleman’s Orkney and Shetland constituency.

Mr Carmichael: The Minister will recall that, last year, the Red Book estimated that the cuts in alcohol duties would lead to a reduction of £185 million in revenue. In fact, from April 2015 through to January 2016, we have seen a £190 million increase in revenues. Will he therefore look very carefully at the request from the Scotch whisky industry for a further 2% cut in spirits duties this year?

Damian Hinds: I know how much the sector values the cut in the duty—it was the first since 1996—and it is great to see the industry in good health, with the number of distilleries and exports to other parts of the world growing strongly. I have received representations from the Scotch Whisky Association among others in relation to the upcoming Budget.

Mr Speaker: On spirits, Mr Andrew Griffiths.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): Any changes or reductions in spirit duty will impact on the market for other drinks, such as beer. I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, but this Government and this Chancellor scrapped Labour’s hated beer duty escalator and cut beer duty three times, which led to more beer sales and more revenue for the Treasury, and which saved hundreds of pubs. Will he continue that support in future?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend speaks in exactly the right spirit. He is the representative of Burton, the home of beer, and nobody has done more to advocate for that important British industry. The Budget is on 16 March. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor makes any and all changes to any duties at such fiscal events.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Scotch whisky is the biggest net contributor to UK trade in goods. Without it, the UK’s trade deficit would be 11% larger. Manufacturers across Scotland, including Spey in my constituency, that have experience of exporting know that domestic rates of tax have an
impact on the attitude of international markets. What consideration has the Chancellor given to industry calls to reduce the excise in the upcoming Budget?

**Damian Hinds:** My right hon. Friend the Chancellor is always very alive to representations from the Scotch whisky industry. Of course, that product accounts for some 25% of UK food and drink exports. Japan has been a strong export market for the sector, but others have not worked out so well. We continue to listen to what that important sector has to say.

**Employment Trends**

8. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent trends in the level of employment.

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands):** The employment level stands at 31.4 million, which represents more people in work in the UK than ever before. In the past year, employment growth has been driven by full-time workers and by high and medium-skilled occupations. That demonstrates that we are now moving into the next phase of our recovery, with high-quality employment helping to boost productivity and raise living standards across the country.

**Alex Chalk:** The number of people in my constituency relying on key out-of-work benefits has fallen by more than 70% since 2010. Does the Minister agree that continuing to invest in GCHQ is key to safeguarding that progress, as it supports the high value cyber-jobs in the state sector and, crucially, the civilian sector?

**Greg Hands:** The Chancellor announced in the spending review that we would be investing more in cyber and that Cheltenham would see those benefits. My hon. Friend is right to praise the employment picture and performance in Cheltenham. It has seen more than 4,000 people get into work, as well as 3,000 fewer people in unemployment. Across the UK as a whole, the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast an increase in employment of 1.1 million over the course of the Parliament.

15. **Dawn Butler** (Brent Central) (Lab): Christians Against Poverty has found that 72% of people on prepayment meters, who are often working, fall behind in their council tax and other bills. What assessment has been made of the impact of this kind of tariff on household debt?

**Greg Hands:** We monitor household debt on an ongoing basis. If the hon. Lady has specific cases she would like to show me, I am sure we could look at them and pass them on to the Department for Work and Pensions and others. I have to say, however, that overall the employment picture remains extremely strong. We have an employment rate at 74.1%. Since the first quarter of 2010, the UK employment rate has grown more than in any other G7 country.

**Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): What more support, pension-wise, can the Chancellor give to the self-employed? Recent trends suggest that in five years’ time 4.7 million British people will be self-employed and will not benefit from auto-enrolment.

**Greg Hands:** My hon. Friend raises a very interesting point. Helping the self-employed is one of the Government’s key priorities. We will have to see what is in the Budget on 16 March.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that I, like many Members, represent a university town? The university is one of the best and biggest employers in my constituency. Universities up and down the country are terrified of our leaving the EU. Our universities receive the most money for research and collaboration of any country in the EU. They will be destroyed by leaving the EU.

**Greg Hands:** I join the hon. Gentleman in campaigning for the UK to remain a member of the EU. That is the right thing for us to do both for the public finances overall and for the future of the UK economy, as the G20 communiqué made clear over the weekend. It may well have an impact on the university sector, too. I am sure that that will be one of the questions featured in the forthcoming debate leading into the referendum.

**Equitable Life**

9. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): If he will reopen the compensation scheme for Equitable Life policyholders.

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin):** The Equitable Life payment scheme has now successfully traced and paid 90% of eligible policyholders. Payments to with-profits annuitants will continue for the life of these annuities. The scheme is now closed to new claims.

**Mr Robertson:** I thank the Minister for that response, but given that many policyholders lost out because of a failure of regulation, which should be overseen by not just this Government but any Government, is it not fair that those policyholders should receive compensation? If they do not, how can any investor have any confidence in the regulatory system that is put in place?

**Harriett Baldwin:** The Chancellor has done more than anyone else to tackle the regulatory failure of the 1990s with regard to Equitable Life. For example, with-profits annuitants will receive full compensation for the life of the annuity, pre-1992 annuitants have received ex gratia payments of up to £10,000, and £775 million has been paid out tax-free to others, despite the constrained public finances. Those on pensions credit got a doubling of their payment just before Christmas.

**John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): Will the Minister clarify how much of the £1.5 billion promised by the Government has been delivered and handed over?

**Harriett Baldwin:** I regularly update Parliament on the precise figures. So far, we are at almost £1 billion. Of course, the payments for the annuities will continue for the rest of their lives.

**Small Businesses**

10. **Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to encourage small businesses to grow.
...mber of their earnings.

What fiscal steps he is taking to help people keep more of their own money by increasing the tax allowance to £11,000 and raising the higher-rate threshold to £50,000 by the end of this Parliament. At the summer Budget, the Government took the first steps towards meeting these commitments by increasing the personal allowance to £11,000 and raising the higher-rate threshold to £43,000 in 2016-17. Twenty-nine million people will pay less tax after these changes and 570,000 will be taken out of income tax altogether.

Jack Lopresti: Does the Minister agree that it would be better to encourage savings by allowing people to keep more of their own money by increasing the tax limit on pensions rather than reducing it, particularly at a time when savers are struggling to get decent returns?

Mr Gauke: As a Government, we want to encourage more saving. We have taken steps to reform our tax system so that pensions become more attractive, but we also need to ensure that the costs of pension tax relief are targeted in the right direction.

Productivity

14. John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): What steps he is taking to improve productivity in the UK. [903828]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Greg Hands): The Government have published their productivity plan, “Fixing the foundations: Creating a more prosperous nation”. This plan outlines the steps we are taking to encourage further investment in the drivers of productivity growth, including science, education, skills and infrastructure. It also sets out the way in which the Government are promoting a dynamic economy through reforming planning laws, boosting competition and creating a northern powerhouse.

John Mc Nally: According to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, UK productivity measured by output per hour is now 18 percentage points below the average of the rest of the G7 economies—the widest gap since records began. Why is productivity deteriorating under this Chancellor?

Greg Hands: I do not accept that. We accept that productivity is a problem, but productivity output per hour is now 0.7% higher than its pre-crisis peak. Productivity is improving at the moment. Clearly, we need to do more, which is why we have laid out a national productivity plan with a set of key targets in key areas such as research infrastructure by creating the National Infrastructure Commission, cutting corporation tax and doing a lot more besides.

Topical Questions

T1. [903805] Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): The core purpose of the Treasury is to ensure that the economy is stable and prosperous.

Kirsten Oswald: Has the Chancellor had a chance to read last week’s National Audit Office report on financial services mis-selling? Does he agree that it draws attention to a missed opportunity to deliver a financial advice sector that protects small-scale investors when things go wrong, as they did in the case of the Connaught fund, with devastating results for a number of my constituents?

Mr Osborne: We have sought to increase consumer protection by introducing a powerful new consumer protection agency in the form of the Financial Conduct Authority, and we have sought to give more financial advice to individuals through, for instance, the Money Advice Service and Pension Wise. However, if the hon. Lady has any specific further ideas that we can consider, I shall be happy to do that.

T3. [903807] Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): The Government are making some of the biggest investments in road and rail in our nation’s history. Is my right hon. Friend aware of any alternative investment...
policies, and of the impact that they would have on our nation's economic security and, in particular, the southern powerhouse?

**Mr Osborne:** My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the big investment that is being made in our nation's infrastructure, especially transport infrastructure. We have the biggest rail programme since the Victorian age and the biggest road programme since the 1970s, which the hon. Lady is seeing in the improvements to the A27 and M27 in her area. Of course, an economic policy that destroys all confidence in the British economy would mean no investment.

**T2. [903806]** Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The OECD has estimated that tax havens are costing developing countries three times the global aid budget. Does the Chancellor share my frustration over the fact that the UK overseas territories have ignored the pleas of the Prime Minister, and have not introduced beneficial ownership registers? What more can be done to end the secrecy and inaction?

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke):** The United Kingdom is leading the way in respect of a public register of beneficial ownership, but other countries, including the overseas territories, are not committed to that. We continue to engage with them, because we believe that they should follow the same direction as us—as, indeed, should other countries.

**T8. [903812]** Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): Tackling the deficit should rightly be a priority for the country. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that everyone pays a fair share in meeting that objective?

**Mr Osborne:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to ensure that this is done fairly. Under the present Government, the richest pay a higher proportion of income tax than they did under the last Labour Government. Figures published this morning by HMRC contain, for the first time, the income tax data for 2013-14, which was when the 50p rate was reduced to 45p. The data reveal that in that year there was an £8 billion increase in revenues from additional-rate taxpayers, which completely defies the predictions made by the Labour party at the time, and shows that we have lower, competitive taxes that are paid by all.

**T4. [903808]** Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Figures from the Public and Commercial Services Union show that 2,000 HMRC staff in Scotland face redundancy, including 150 experienced and dedicated people in Inverness. At the same time, the HMRC overtime bill is about £6 million a month. Can the Chancellor explain to my constituents how that makes any sense at all?

**Mr Gauke:** HMRC is engaged in changes that will be focused on 13 regional centres across the United Kingdom. The same proportion of its work force will continue to be in Scotland, which is actually a larger percentage than the population of Scotland. We are seeking to improve the efficiency of HMRC, and we believe that regional centres will enable it to achieve more for less. It is already bringing in more money and a better rate of return than we have ever had before.

**Mr Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): About 40,000 people in my constituency have benefited from the rise in the personal allowance since 2010. Can the Chancellor confirm that the Government will continue to help hard-working people to keep more of the money that they earn?

**Mr Osborne:** That is absolutely what the Government were elected to deliver. We have manifesto commitments to deliver not just the £50,000 threshold for the higher rate, but a £12,500 personal allowance, so that more people can see the benefit of either paying no tax if they are low paid, or paying less tax if they are better paid.

**T5. [903809]** Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Chancellor tell us when he is due to publish the proposals for the distribution and calculation of the apprenticeship levy to the devolved nations, and whether the Governments in those nations have agreed to it?

**Mr Osborne:** We are working to get those arrangements right. They are clearly complex, because of cross-border companies that will pay a single levy rate, but we are having good discussions with the Scottish Government. I think that, as with the agreement on the fiscal charter, we can work together for the benefit of the United Kingdom.

**Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome the fact that my constituents have been given more control over their finances, thanks to changes implemented by the Government. Can the Minister advise me on what steps have been taken to ensure that the regulation applied to small high street financial advisers and insurance brokers is both fair and proportionate, given the important service that they provide?

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin):** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this point. We have launched something called the financial advice market review, which will be reporting around the time of the Budget. We will be looking at how to make financial advice more affordable and more available, and also at how to get the right kind of regulatory balance for smaller firms.

**T6. [903810]** Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Following reports that Hinkley Point C faces further delays, will the Chancellor revisit his decision effectively to write the French an extremely generous long-dated option and instead bring forward fall-back options?

**Mr Osborne:** We are working with the French Government, and all the signs are that they are committed to this project. This is a good example of how the United Kingdom, working with France and indeed attracting investment from Asia, is getting a new generation of nuclear power under way. That was promised for 20 years or more and did not happen, but it is now going to take place in Somerset.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): I am proud to have been part of the Government who introduced the national living wage, but I wonder whether my right hon. Friend has had a chance to look at the report from the British Retail Consortium entitled “Retail 2020”, which talks about that and about the impact of internet shopping.
Mr Osborne: I did see that report yesterday. We all have to accept that the retail industry faces an enormous amount of change, particularly because of what is happening on the internet and the way in which people are shopping online. I personally think that one of the biggest changes we can make right now is to allow shops to open on a Sunday, which is the biggest single day for internet shopping. We cannot say that we want to protect our high street shops while in the same breath saying that they cannot open on one day every week, given that the internet is open 24 hours a day. We shall have a chance to vote on that question next week.

T7. [903811] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Chancellor’s statement on ECOFIN referred to the UK seeking a multilateral agreement on making the details of the tax paid by companies publicly available on a country by country basis. Will he tell us what measures he will take to achieve that, and on what timetable? As a first step, will he admit that his Google tax deal was not a great success, and does he accept the Public Accounts Committee’s call for full transparency?

Mr Osborne: The Public Accounts Committee has investigated HMRC deals in the past and it is of course welcome to do so again. It gave HMRC a clean bill of health on its approach to these things. We are introducing country by country reporting, and the regulations came into force last week. That is happening only because this Prime Minister put the matter on the agenda in this country and internationally, and I have been calling, at the EU and at the G20, for an international agreement on public reporting so that we can know what companies are paying in different jurisdictions rather than just reading reports about it.

Dame Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): The local economy in Hornchurch and Upminster comprises thousands of small businesses. Can the Chancellor offer any encouragement to the Federation of Small Businesses, which is pressing for tax simplification in order to reduce the burden of tax administration for small businesses?

Mr Gauke: One of the areas in which we can make progress is the digitisation of the tax system, which could help a lot of businesses. I would also make the point that the Office of Tax Simplification has been strengthened and are we putting it on a statutory footing. We are looking forward to seeing a couple of reports from it over the next few days on what we can do to help small businesses in particular.

Mr Osborne: The steel industry faces a big challenge at the moment, and that is true in many other countries in the world, as the price of steel has collapsed. We have taken a number of steps to ensure the level playing field that the hon. Gentleman speaks of. First, we have taken the industry out of the energy levies that were imposing additional costs on it. Secondly, we have made sure that local areas that have had redundancies get the support they need. Thirdly, we have changed our procurement rules so that we can make sure we are buying British steel and taking into account the social impact of those steel purchases in making our value-for-money assessments. Fourthly, as I said in reply to an earlier question from him, we are working, through our partners in the EU, to make it clear that we do not and cannot support Chinese steel dumping, and that we need to take action against it.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be well aware that debates have been held and questions asked in the House regarding serious allegations of collusion between banks and valuers in order to deliberately undervalue and seize assets. Has he considered the current regulations on such banks and valuers, and whether there needs to be a broader remit for the Serious Fraud Office and other organisations to investigate these serious allegations, whose number is growing?

Harriett Baldwin: I am aware of the points my hon. Friend has raised in Westminster Hall and obviously I am keen for our system to have a tough set of rules on conduct in the banking system. I would welcome the opportunity to meet him to discuss these specific allegations in more detail.

T10. [903814] Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): If the Chancellor believes that a strong steel sector is fundamental to a strong northern powerhouse, what steps is he taking to level the playing field for the steel industry, the foundation of our manufacturing and defence industries, so that it can have a prosperous future to match its prosperous past?

Mr Osborne: The steel industry faces a big challenge at the moment, and that is true in many other countries in the world, as the price of steel has collapsed. We have taken a number of steps to ensure the level playing field that the hon. Gentleman speaks of. First, we have taken the industry out of the energy levies that were imposing additional costs on it. Secondly, we have made sure that local areas that have had redundancies get the support they need. Thirdly, we have changed our procurement rules so that we can make sure we are buying British steel and taking into account the social impact of those steel purchases in making our value-for-money assessments. Fourthly, as I said in reply to an earlier question from him, we are working, through our partners in the EU, to make it clear that we do not and cannot support Chinese steel dumping, and that we need to take action against it.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Let me follow the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) by raising the key issue of the apprenticeship levy, because the devolved Governments are moving towards elections and we need to know about this as soon as possible. Will there be a Barnett consequential attached to it?
Mr Osborne: Our intention is to use the principles of the Barnett formula to make sure that the devolved Administrations, not only in Scotland, but in Northern Ireland, do get the resources they need. Of course we would urge them then to spend those resources on training, but that is ultimately a matter for them and the people to whom they are accountable.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Given the importance of family investment in start-up businesses, particularly science and technology businesses, where a leap of faith is often required, will the Chancellor, in the Budget, consider lifting the restrictions on family investment under the enterprise investment scheme and the seed enterprise investment scheme, so that mum and dad can invest alongside everybody else on the same terms?

Mr Osborne: I am happy to take that as a Budget representation. I am sure my hon. Friend will understand if he turns up on Budget day, he will see my response to it. The SEIS and EIS have been enormously successful. We have to make sure that the rules are tight enough so that they are supporting the kind of entrepreneurial activity we want, rather than being used as a vehicle for tax avoidance. I think we have got the balance right so far, but I am aware of good, positive proposals that people have put forward to improve it.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Chancellor chose to give a puff to his desire for Sunday trading liberalisation, but is he aware of the study produced yesterday which showed that all there will be is a switch of activity from small shops to big shops, and that that will mean a loss of thousands of jobs? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) says that the Chancellor has already dealt with that question. As I have often had cause to observe, repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons.

Mr Osborne: To repeat myself, Mr Speaker, I do not agree with the hon. Lady, because it has been the case that when we have extended opening hours we have not seen not a displacement of jobs, but an increase in jobs. That is the assessment from the retail industry. Of course, these arrangements exist in Scotland, in many European countries and in the United States. Many of those are countries with strong Christian faiths, so I do not think there is a contradiction there. We cannot in this House constantly say that we worry about our high street and then not allow high street stores to open on the day when the biggest level of internet shopping takes place. This is one of the answers to helping our high street. It is not the only one, but it is an important one.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire councils are currently preparing detailed regeneration plans. Can the Chancellor assure me that he will give them serious consideration, so that my constituents can gain maximum benefit from the northern powerhouse initiative?

Mr Osborne: Absolutely. We will give careful consideration—as I always do—to the proposals that my hon. Friend comes forward with to support North Lincolnshire and his own constituency. We have been able to make investments in new roads, reduce the tolls on the Humber bridge, and introduce enterprise zones. I would love to hear of any new ideas that he has.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Happy St David’s day to you, Mr Speaker.

The Chancellor often talks about repairing the roof when the sun is shining. Norway, a country the size of Scotland, managed to amass £810 billion in an oil fund when the sun shone. Just how much have the broad shoulders of the UK saved for a moment such as this to help north-east Scotland? Is the figure indeed zero?

Mr Osborne: We are providing support to Scotland, and that support is entrenched in the fiscal framework that we have agreed with the Scottish Government. The hon. Gentleman cannot duck his responsibilities. He wanted Scotland to be independent on 24 March—this month. If we had gone ahead with that—if the Scottish people had voted for it—there would have been a fiscal catastrophe in Scotland, because oil revenues have fallen by more than 90%. We had a question earlier from a Scottish National party Member—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting, but that was a very unseemly gesticulation by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil). I remind him of his status in this House as the Chair of a Select Committee. He is an aspiring statesman and must conduct himself accordingly.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): In response to an earlier question on productivity, my right hon. Friend mentioned the drivers of growth being investment in schools and investment in science and technology. Does he, like me, welcome the Government’s commitment to train 17,500 more teachers in science, technology, engineering and maths, and does he think that there is absolutely no time to waste in recruiting those teachers?

Mr Osborne: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. It is one of the big national challenges to get more children, particularly more girls, studying STEM subjects at school. The key to that is to get more STEM teachers. We have a series of incentives to drive that forward. Of course through our school freedoms, schools also have the tools to recruit teachers themselves.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must now move on. Demand invariably exceeds supply. No one is keener to facilitate questions than I, but we do need pithy questions and pithy answers.
Syria

12.37 pm

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the cessation of hostilities in Syria.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Syrian conflict is now almost in its sixth year. As a result of Assad's brutality and the terror of Daesh, more than 250,000 people have lost their lives, half the population have been displaced, and more than 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian aid.

Russia's military intervention last autumn compounded the violence. Russia claims to be targeting terrorists, yet it has carried out strikes on moderate opposition groups and civilians. More than 1,300 civilians have been killed and 5,800 injured by Russian or regime airstrikes since the start of Russia's campaign.

Our goal is for Syria to become a stable, peaceful state with an inclusive Government capable of protecting their people from Daesh and other extremists. Only when that happens can stability be returned to the region, which is necessary to stem the flow of people fleeing Syria and seeking refuge in Europe. The last few months have seen some progress towards that. The International Syria Support Group came together at the end of 2015 in Vienna to help to facilitate a return to a process leading to a political transition in Syria.

In December, opposition groups came together to form the higher negotiations commission, representing the widest possible range of opposition views, and nominated a team to negotiate with the regime. Proximity talks between the regime and opposition began under UN auspices in January, but were paused as a result of a deteriorating situation on the ground. The ISSG met again in Munich at the Munich security conference on 11 February, agreeing that there should be a cessation of hostilities and humanitarian access to named locations in Syria. Since then, the US and Russia have agreed at the highest levels on the terms of a cessation of hostilities. The agreement was codified in UN Security Council resolution 2268 on 26 February.

The cessation of hostilities is an important step towards ending the terrible violence in Syria and bringing a lasting political settlement. It came into force on 27 February. Since then, we have seen a reduction in violence, which is of course a huge step forwards, but we need to see that sustained and to see a reduction in the number of reported violations.

We have received reports of a number of violations, which we have passed to the UN and the ISSG co-chairs in Geneva. We need swift action to reduce those violations. We look to Russia in particular to use its influence with the regime to ensure that the cessation endures and that there are no further violations. It is crucial that the opposition see action being taken in response to allegations of violations to ensure their commitment and that of their Syrian constituents to the process.

It is essential that the cessation of hostilities supports the wider political process. We support UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura’s plans to resume peace negotiations on 7 March. Those negotiations must deliver a political transition away from Assad to a legitimate Government that can support the needs and aspirations of all Syrians and put an end to the suffering of the Syrian people.

At the same time, we call for complete and unfettered humanitarian access across Syria and an end to all violations of international humanitarian law, as set out in UN Security Council resolution 2254. We are relieved that desperately needed aid convos are now arriving in some besieged areas of Syria, including those named in the Munich ISSG agreement of 11 February. It is imperative that that continues.

The international community and particularly Russia, which has unique influence, must put pressure on the Assad regime to lift sieges and grant full and sustained humanitarian access. As I have said, there must be a political solution to the crisis in Syria. It is imperative that the steps I have described are implemented by all parties and that the cessation of hostilities endures. The UK is working strenuously to make that happen and will continue to do so.

Jo Cox: I thank the Minister for updating the House on such a vital issue. The cessation of hostilities in Syria that began on Friday is a much needed ray of hope in this tragic civil war, yet, as he has set out, it faces serious challenges after growing reports from international non-governmental organisations and the media of numerous violations of the truce. Syrian opposition leaders have claimed that it was close to collapse over the weekend and the French Government have urgently called for a meeting of the monitoring group amid allegations that Syrian and Russian forces have seriously breached its terms. In this context, will the Minister set out specifically what action the UK is taking within the ISSG to ensure robust and transparent monitoring of the cessation agreement?

Secondly, is the UK joining efforts led by France for urgent action in the ISSG on the growing reports of violations of the cessation agreement by Assad and by Russia? Indeed, will the Minister address how it is even conceivable that the monitoring of the agreement is being jointly conducted by Russia, the same party that is responsible for the vast majority of recent civilian deaths? If the reports of Russian and regime violations are verified, what measures will the UK pursue to force a change in the calculations of both Putin and Assad? The UK has a critical role to play in giving everybody confidence in this system, in particular that the violations will be called out and the agreement protected. Are the Government considering, for example, further targeted sanctions against Russian entities in the event of further violations?

Further, what is the UK's assessment of the mobilisation of Assad's forces and militias to encircle Aleppo? Is this not a direct violation of the cessation agreement? Can the Minister confirm that the cessation agreement covers those areas where al-Nusra or any other Security Council-designated terrorist group is mixed with the moderate opposition? If the cessation holds this week, can the Minister confirm that negotiations on political transition will be at the very top of the agenda at the meeting in Geneva next week?

Finally, in the light of the reduction in violence, many Members of this House are deeply concerned about the lack of access to besieged areas inside Syria, particularly...
Daraya just outside Damascus, where people are starving to death. There is no ISIL or al-Nusra in Daraya, and it is unacceptable that the Assad regime, with the backing of Russia, is preventing this humanitarian aid, paid for by the British taxpayer, from getting to the most vulnerable. Do the Government and their partners have a deadline by which aid will reach Daraya and other besieged areas?

Mr Ellwood: I begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) and her commitment to this area. She is co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Syria, and I acknowledge the work that she does in raising these matters in the Chamber and elsewhere. The House is all the wiser for it. She raises a series of issues and I will do my best to answer them, but, as I have done in the past, I will write to her with more detail.

On the hon. Lady’s last question, about making sure that aid gets through, I am pleased to see that I am joined here and supported by my colleagues from the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence. As the hon. Lady knows, we hosted the Syria conference a couple of weeks ago in order to make sure, first, that the funds were available for the United Nations organisations to get to the necessary areas to provide the aid and assistance once the cessation of hostilities had taken effect. There have been varying degrees of success in trucks getting through. She will be aware that we have to get confirmation from the regime that the trucks can have safe passage. Airdrops have been used for the first time but have been less successful, for obvious reasons—factors such as who receives the kit on the ground, the weather conditions, where the supplies land, and ownership of the supplies once the drops take place all present difficulties, but further drops will take place in the future.

The hon. Lady asks what more can be done. It is imperative that those who are putting together the ceasefire, which is happening at the highest level from the telephone calls between President Putin and President Obama, create and co-ordinate the verification model. That is not fully in place. This is a highly complex task because of the number of players involved across Syria and the challenges in making sure that verification can take place. The UK is pushing the ISSG co-chairs to investigate all allegations. We are using our own capabilities to feed into the system any violations that we become aware of so that they can be investigated. We have sent additional staff to the UN in Geneva to assist in this effort, and we are negotiating and discussing these matters with our UN Security Council colleagues.

The hon. Lady talked about the difficulties in Aleppo. The situation is concerning. In the lead-up to the cessation of hostilities, people took advantage before the cessation came into effect on 27 February. As I said in my opening remarks, it is imperative that Russia shows leadership and shows that it recognises that it has a unique place and unique influence with the Assad regime, to make sure that the purpose of the cessation of hostilities, which is to allow that political transition, is achieved.

The hon. Lady asked about the talks taking place with Staffan de Mistura on 7 March. It is critical to get the parties together. They broke apart last time because of the continued bombing that took place. It was the UN envoy who closed the meeting down before somebody walked out again. We do not want to see that repeated, which is why we are encouraging parties to resume those discussions, taking advantage of the cessation of hostilities that is in place, and we hope they are successful.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Notwithstanding the wholly understandable scepticism of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) about Russian intentions, the fact is that this ceasefire would not have happened had it not been pushed for quite hard by the Russians, alongside the United States. The Minister referred to verification mechanisms, but what practical military-to-military co-ordination is going on between the Russians and the coalition to ensure that any breaches of the ceasefire are immediately understood and brought to an end and that, as far as possible, the ceasefire is properly observed, without accidents happening and with both sides knowing what the other is doing?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, raises an important point, which I will divide in two, if I may. There is a deconfliction system that makes sure that the coalition’s aircraft and involvement are separated from Russia’s, and that has now been in place for some time. However, what we are talking about here is a verification mechanism for the cessation of hostilities. The verification process has yet to be put in place; it is still being agreed by the co-chairs—Russia and the United States—and details will emerge soon.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I very much welcome the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox), and I pay tribute to her excellent work on this issue.

The world community is watching the ceasefire very closely, and we all want it to be successful, not least to allow humanitarian aid into areas blighted by the conflict, but also to give a boost to the tentative peace talks. As the ceasefire has now been in operation for a few days, I would like to ask a number of questions.

First, the letter from the Syrian National Council to Ban Ki-moon alleged there were 15 breaches of the ceasefire by Russia and the Assad regime. Following that, France called for an urgent meeting of the International Syria Support Group. Will the Minister confirm when the group will meet? What powers does it have to make a ruling on breaches of the ceasefire? Does it need unanimity to do so?

Among reported breaches of the ceasefire, the most worrying was a reported gas attack in the Irbin area, with indications of a link to the Assad regime. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government are aware of that attack? What special provisions are in place to investigate chemical weapons attacks?

One key problem is a lack of agreement on which groups are terror organisations and what action is allowed. Will the Minister explain whether that will be discussed at the International Syria Support Group?

To address the humanitarian situation, we need access to areas where there are no hostilities. Will the Minister explain what steps have been taken to establish the geographical demarcation of the ceasefire?
Over the past six months, Russia has repeatedly acted to prolong the conflict. What discussions have there been with our allies in the EU to put pressure on Russia to abide by the ceasefire?

Saudi Arabia also has a key position of influence. It is especially concerning, therefore, to hear of a possible Saudi response to Russian action. Has the Minister made any representations to the Saudi Government about this?

Finally, may I ask about the status of the group Ahrar al-Sham? I understand that it was not a signatory to the ceasefire but had indicated that it would abide by it. However, it now claims that its headquarters in Idlib were attacked in a Russian airstrike—a claim backed by several sources. Will the Minister confirm whether the group is considered to be outside the terms of the ceasefire by the UK and the US?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady asked a series of questions. First, the latest UN Security Council resolution—resolution 2268—which confirmed the cessation of hostilities, underlines the importance of a previous one, resolution 2254, which is all about the ability to gain access to various areas where ownership is sometimes confusing. That is done on a very local basis to make sure that agreements take place and that UN and other convoys have the series of permissions they need, so that they are not halted at checkpoints, with the food being taken from them and used as a weapon of war. It is difficult for me to give a comprehensive reply for the whole of Syria, but these things are done on an area-by-area basis. The method for taking deliveries also reflects the threat level. Clearly, there are areas surrounded by Daesh, where it is impossible to have such agreements.

The hon. Lady spoke about the chemical weapons attack. A number of UN organisations are looking into a wider piece to do with the use of chemical weapons across Syria. They are in the process of completing a report to the UN, which is due shortly. If I may, I will write to her with more details on that.

On the work being done to provide international humanitarian aid, I go back to the conference we had, where we were able to garner an awful lot of support, including from Saudi Arabia, for making sure that money is filtered through the various UN organisations, so that they can get through to the various locations.

The hon. Lady mentions a number of other extremist groups, including Ahrar al-Sham, and there is Jaysh al-Islam as well. They have not been considered as moderate; they have not been included in the discussions, and they were not represented in the talks where the Saudis brought the moderate groups together.1

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I just ask where the Foreign Secretary is? I know he is very busy, but the House of Commons must always come first. We are at least owed an explanation.

May I suggest that the Labour and Conservative establishments, in being such an outlier for the overthrow of unpleasant authoritarian regimes—whether Gaddafi’s, Assad’s or Saddam’s—have merely provided an opening for far worse, totalitarian movements? It is also arguable that we have had very little influence in the latest round of peace negotiations, as the Americans cosy up to the Russians. Will the Foreign Office now at least accept that there may be some merit in Assad being allowed to go gracefully in elections, however imperfect?

Mr Ellwood: First, may I say that I will not take it personally that my hon. Friend feels I am not adequate to answer today’s question? This is an urgent question, and the Foreign Secretary was not able to get here. I will certainly do my best to convey to him the fact that my hon. Friend would have loved to see him instead of me.

On the transition process, we ended 2015, after five years of hostilities, with opposition groups coming together for the first time. For the first time, we had international stakeholders, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, around the table at the Vienna talks discussing these matters. That was the first time a transition process was discussed, the first time an 18-month process was to be put in place and the first time life after Assad was actually considered.

It is important to recognise that it must be for all the people of Syria to decide their fate, whether they are Kurds, Druze, Alawites or Sunnis. We must remember that 80% of the deaths in Syria have been caused by Assad and his regime. That is why we say that it would be inappropriate for him to participate in the long-term future of the country. The whole purpose of bringing these organisations together to discuss the democratic process is that they will decide the transition away from Assad.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): May I join the Chairman of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), in urging that the correct policy for Her Majesty’s Government is to give every facility to the rapid establishment of a verification regime? We can engage in tit-for-tat allegations about who is breaching what, but this is the only ceasefire we have. The Minister will know that there were reports this morning from Kurdish forces about our NATO ally using the ceasefire as an opportunity to build up forces against them, so the establishment of the verification regime is key.

Will the Minister tell us in more detail about the urgency of attempts to bring in humanitarian relief? Which convoys have been allowed through and which have been stopped? Which airstrikes have been successful and which have not? Given the overwhelming urgency of the humanitarian crisis, the House would appreciate it if the Minister found a way to provide Members with exact detail on that.

Mr Ellwood: I have gone into some detail about the urgency of the humanitarian relief work. This is partly why a cessation of hostilities was needed. In places such as Madaya, people have resorted to eating pets, such is their plight. Thanks to the agreement between Lavrov and John Kerry at the Munich security conference, which led to discussions between Putin and President Obama, we have seen this build-up of a cessation of hostilities. I was cautiously optimistic when I saw President Putin make a rare live appearance on Russian television stating his commitment to ensuring that a cessation of hostilities came about.

However, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, experience shows that whenever a deadline is put into a ceasefire or cessation of hostilities, there is

then an effort by hardliners—by opportunists—to take advantage of the period before the deadline comes into force to gain territory, to further their lines and to make a greater impact, so that when the hostilities cease they are in a stronger position. That is exactly what we have seen in this case. We require every country, whether it be Turkey, Russia or Assad’s regime, to hold fast—to recognise that the world is watching and that although the humanitarian situation is absolutely dire, there is an international community that wants to help and can do so only if it has access to the various areas that I have articulated.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is there any evidence whatsoever that Assad would be willing to go graciously? Does not all the evidence show that he is determined to stay in power? As for Russia, would it not be right to conclude that it has never really been interested in using its military might against Daesh, because first and foremost it wants to consolidate in every possible way the Assad regime, which, as the Minister said, has been responsible for some of the worst crimes committed in the past 25 or 30 years? Russia has a large moral responsibility for what is occurring on the ground.

Mr Ellwood: I partly agree with the hon. Gentleman. He makes very clear, as I have, the atrocities that Assad has inflicted. That is why we believe there is no long-term place for his involvement. What has happened is the recognition that there needs to be a very clear transition process. We should not just be talking about Assad. Assad and his cohorts—his family and so forth—have a firm grip on the top of the regime. It is simply not possible to remove the individual man and then assume that life can move on; it is far more complex than that, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware.

We should also recognise—though this is no excuse for Russia’s behaviour—that Russia has had a long-term interest in the country since 1946, when it started to train the new Syrian army after Syria gained its independence. Syria backed the Soviets during the cold war. Assad’s father trained as a MiG pilot in Russia. There is a bond between the country that we cannot use its influence in a positive way. We need Russia to recognise that there needs to be a very clear transition. It is simply not possible to remove the individual man and then assume that life can move on; it is far more complex than that, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware.

Mr Ellwood: I partly agree with the hon. Gentleman. He makes very clear, as I have, the atrocities that Assad has inflicted. That is why we believe there is no long-term place for his involvement. What has happened is the recognition that there needs to be a very clear transition process. We should not just be talking about Assad. Assad and his cohorts—his family and so forth—have a firm grip on the top of the regime. It is simply not possible to remove the individual man and then assume that life can move on; it is far more complex than that, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware.

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Mr John Baron (Basingdon and Billericay) (Con): The Government have placed great importance on the need for the 70,000 moderates they estimate are taking on Assad to swing round and take the ground battle to Daesh, given that we all accept that airstrikes alone will not succeed against Daesh and it is becoming increasingly evident that there are already too many aircraft chasing too few targets. What progress is being made with those plans, and are the Government still convinced that there are 70,000 moderates left?

Mr Ellwood: The point about the 70,000 moderates has been raised before. The figure is an estimate. We should understand that this is a very divided group of people who have been standing up to Assad since the Arab spring. They are the pockets of resistance that had a choice, when Assad started to bomb and kill his own people, either to go extremist to go fundamentalist—or to say, “No, I want something different. I do not want to be part of the Ba’ath party in the future; I want the freedoms that I am seeing develop in other parts of the Arab world.” They are disparate. They are in Aleppo in the north, through to Idlib, through to parts of Damascus, and down to Daraa in the south. Those pockets of people have stood up, and they have now come together by participating in the Geneva talks that are taking place thanks to the leadership of Saudi Arabia. So yes, they are not united in the sense that we would like them to be, but we are moving forward, and they now need to be part of the process that works out what the country looks like post-Assad.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): In my view, the people of Syria have paid a really dreadful price for our failure to act three years ago after Assad used chemical weapons against his own people, and even earlier than that.

I want to ask the Minister about a glimmer of hope: the elections in Iran and the impact they might have on the situation in the middle east and in Syria in particular. Does he think that what has happened in Iran is a pointer to the policy that his Government, the previous Labour Government, Europe and President Obama have pursued with the Iranian regime?

Mr Ellwood: On the first point, there is no point in saying so now, but many of us will look back at how different life would have been, and how things would have changed, had we taken different action on a punitive strike. The reason why Assad is back in play now is that Russia has backed him. He was falling—we were seeing his slow demise—and Russia came back in to support its person. That is why we are in the position that we are in today.

The right hon. Gentleman asks a very relevant question that is slightly outside the scope of this subject, but with your permission, Mr Speaker, I will say that we are cautiously optimistic and welcome what has happened in Tehran. There are only early results yet, but with the moderates in the Assembly of Experts and in the Majlis itself, this is the first opportunity for the people of Iran to have a say in the future of their country.

However, Iran will be judged by its actions because of its proxy involvement with Hezbollah in Lebanon, in Damascus in Syria, in Baghdad in Iraq, in Sana’a in Yemen, and in Bahrain. If we see changes there, we will know that we are working with a different Iran, but until then we should expect the same.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) for raising this issue. Following John Kerry’s statement that it may be too late to keep Syria whole, will the Minister update the House on any conversations he has had with his American counterpart on the possible partition of Syria?

Mr Ellwood: It is for the people of Syria to determine their future as to how the country needs to be managed and should be governed. We are at the very, very early stages. It would be wrong to go further than that. History shows that Britain has not always been in the best place to make its assessments, not least in this particular patch of the world.
Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Russia has absolutely no desire, I am sure, to bring hope or humanitarian relief to many areas of Syria; rather, it wants to increase fear and despair, and cause the collapse of the Opposition. I am also sure that it hopes that the peace period will bring a greater influx of refugees fleeing from Syria towards the west. Are we monitoring whether that is happening? Are we using our intelligence and surveillance capability as part of that monitoring given the apparent need for observation of what the Russians and the Assad regime are doing, in violation of the peace process?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady, who follows these matters very seriously in the Committees that she is involved with, puts her finger on a very important point. This is not just about Syria; it is also about the wider strategic implications of what is happening elsewhere, including the role that Russia is playing on the international stage, not least in Ukraine and Crimea, and the consequences of the influx of refugees and its political impact across Europe. We are not in any way blind to that. That is all the more reason why we need to continue our pressure at the United Nations Security Council in making sure that a verification mechanism comes into play as soon as possible.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): It is a moral outrage to take the life of any non-combatant. What estimate have the Government made of the number of non-combatants killed by Russia, and can the Minister reassure my constituents that the Royal Air Force is not responsible for any deaths of non-combatants?

Mr Ellwood: I can confirm the latter part of my hon. Friend’s question. The rules of engagement that we follow are very robust indeed. As I said in my opening remarks, we estimate that more than 1,300 civilians have been killed either by Russia or by Russian-supported airstrikes, and another 5,800 have been injured.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On the subject of airdrops, could the Minister confirm whether the RAF have been involved in them, whether they are taking place with the formal agreement or just the acquiescence of the Russians and Assad; and whether they could be scaled up if Assad and Putin continue to starve Syrian civilians?

Mr Ellwood: The coalition does a lot of planning in order to establish the best mechanism to provide aid relief in any particular area. The RAF itself has not been involved in airdrops per se; the United States has been leading on that. As I have said, they have had a marginal effect. They are subject to weather conditions and to who is on the ground to receive the actual aid. It is then a matter of luck as to how that aid is distributed. Often it is unfairly distributed, because the strongest end up grabbing the kit and taking it away with them. That is why the preferred mechanism is to get permission to go through the various checkpoints and deliver the aid by truck.1

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox), who has done a lot of work on this issue over the past few months—and, indeed, over many years in her previous incarnation—and to the Minister, who has done an awful lot of work in the region? We have spoken a lot about the pressures that the Russians have brought to bear on the legitimate opposition to the Assad regime. Could he also tell us about the pressures they have brought to bear on our allies in the region, and what he is doing, working with the Lebanese, the Iraqis, the Jordanians and, indeed, the Turks, to ensure that we deliver a peaceful solution for Syria, not a wasteland made by Russian bombs?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. He is right to mention the impact that the situation in Syria is having on its neighbours. We should all pay tribute to the generosity of countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, which have taken in so many refugees. The whole House will appreciate and support the fact that much of the funds we provide are going to those other countries as well.

One of the major changes that took place at the Syrian conference was that to employment opportunities for Syrian refugees so that they are not a burden on domestic employment situations. That happened partly because of the funding that is coming through and the opportunities being created by other countries. We are doing our best to make sure that Turkey plays its role—which is complicated, given its relationship with the Kurds—in moderating its actions and making sure that the cessation of hostilities lasts.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Russia’s aggression and flagrant violations of international law in a number of areas have strained and limited bilateral relations over recent years, and yet the Government say that they are urging Russia to play a more constructive role in the Syria conflict. Will the Minister outline the ways in which the Government have contact with the Russian Federation at present?

Mr Ellwood: I travelled with the hon. Gentleman on a visit to Kiev a couple of years ago, so I am familiar with his knowledge and understanding of and interest in these matters. It is important to recognise that. There are a series of opportunities when the international community comes together, and Foreign Minister Lavrov, John Kerry and our Foreign Secretary are now able to meet on a regular drumbeat. The International Syria Support Group is one such opportunity and it will meet later in March. There are also counter-ISIL coalition conferences, the most recent of which took place in Rome, and the Munich security conference includes not only public statements, but private bilateral opportunities. The most recent conference was different, however, because it was important to recognise the involvement of President Putin and President Obama. That is why I think the world was hoping that the outcome would be more optimistic.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I, too, want to pay tribute to my near neighbour, the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox), for continuing to bring to this Chamber the plight of the Syrian people. All sides must respect the ceasefire. What discussions has the Minister had with the Turkish Government about reports that Turkish forces have been shelling Syrian Kurds?

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Mr Ellwood: I am aware of those reports and we have encouraged Turkey to recognise the importance of the cessation of hostilities and the opportunity it gives for further political engagement, which will itself be an opportunity to solve some of the problems that Turkey is enduring. We do not want people compounding the problem by taking advantage of the cessation of hostilities in order to gain ground, so we have been working with Turkey to encourage it to recognise the cessation of hostilities.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Both the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) have brought to the attention of this House serious offences to human dignity. The people of Syria must know that we see what is happening to them. The Minister has previously indicated that the international community is working to a timetable. Could he update us on that?

Mr Ellwood: It is for Staffan de Mistura to bring to the parties together and they will recommence their discussions on 7 March. It is not my timetable. It was first agreed at the Marrakech talks as a tentative idea for an 18-month transition programme. We need to recognise, however, that that was prior to the Russian bombings, which unfortunately led to the January talks falling apart. I hope there will still be a programme of transition in 18 months, but it is for the UN-led talks to confirm whether it is still on track.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The most credible and consistently effective ground forces against Daesh in both Syria and Iraq are our friends the Kurds, and yet time and again our NATO ally Turkey uses any excuse, including the present ceasefire, to attack and degrade them. When will Her Majesty’s Government take this issue seriously, call in the Turkish ambassador and say that that behaviour is simply not acceptable on any level, that we will not be able to defeat Daesh in Syria and Iraq without the Kurds, and that Turkey needs seriously to think again?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend articulates the complexity and difficulty of the situation we face in Syria, with so many moving parts, organisations and entities pursuing separate agendas, which makes it very difficult indeed. The situation between Turkey and the PKK—which is a listed terrorist group, including from a British perspective—is recognised by this House, and we encourage Turkey to recognise and honour the cessation of hostilities. I join my hon. Friend in recognising the incredible work that the Kurds in Iraq have done in order to hold back Daesh and liberate territory. They will play a pivotal role in the eventual liberation of Mosul, which will be significant for Iraq to move on to a new chapter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox) as well. Last week the Defence Committee visited the middle east, where all our discussions focused on Syria and how to bring about a peace process and agreement. We welcome the current peace agreement, but the issue of Turkey came up in each of the countries we visited. Its position is to destabilise the situation in the middle east. It has a truly hedonistic attitude and some very strange bedfellows, both politically and militarily. What discussions have taken place with Turkey to ensure that it stops buying oil from Daesh-controlled territories and selling it for them, and that it stops attacking coalition forces? If it wants to be part of the coalition, we need its help.

Mr Ellwood: I can confirm that Turkey does not purchase oil from Daesh. Black market oil is moved along the porous border—there is no doubt about that—and every effort is made, including by Turkey, to make sure that that is cut down. We should not forget that only a few weeks ago Daesh committed a terrible attack in Istanbul, so Turkey is as committed as everybody else to participating in the coalition’s efforts to defeat Daesh.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): After five years of death and destruction, I welcome the fact that there is finally a ceasefire and some hope for the future. Given the extent of the war crimes and the brutality that have marked out the war, can the Minister reassure me that an individual’s involvement in the transitional process will not give them immunity from later facing justice?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and efforts are being made to ensure that all war crimes are collated. That will not be forgotten, and we will be returning to the subject in a serious way once the cessation of hostilities has moved forward.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister is right to say that the statement by the International Syria Support Group is welcome. However, the actions of the Russians rather fly in the face of that, because they are signing up to a transition plan at the same time as bolstering the Assad regime. Can the Minister tell us the extent to which he believes that the Russians understand the level of transition that is required, and whether they recognise that the Assad regime needs to come to an end if Syria is to have a peaceful future?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about making sure that there is a verification process in place. We are doing our part in making sure that we pass information on to the United Nations. A report will go to the Secretary-General of the UN in 15 days, and at 30-day intervals after that, confirming the situation of the cessation of hostilities and any breaches that occur. It is important for the United Kingdom, America and other countries to keep the pressure on Russia to make sure that it recognises its unique position in ensuring that the cessation is honoured, so that we can expedite the political process and alleviate the humanitarian situation.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): If the cessation of hostilities holds, and continues to hold, will my hon. Friend explain what impact he thinks it will have on the flow of displaced people within Syria, and on Syrian refugees? Can he elaborate—this may be a little premature—on the role that Britain could play in making sure that Syrian refugees can return home?

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful for the question, because it allows me to speak about the success of the Syrian conference that took place a couple of weeks ago in London. In a single day, we gained a record amount of pledges—$11 billion—from across the world. That is
important in ensuring that the Syrian people recognise that the international community is ready to support them. Once they see that the cessation of hostilities is likely to last and that a political transition is likely to take place, they will make the decision not to turn their back on their own country—not to flee their country to try to find a better life in Europe.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The right to unimpeded humanitarian aid is set out in international law, but, as the Minister has pointed out, whether convoys even leave depends on the assessment of the situation of the ground and, in some cases, on the assessment of the Assad regime. Can the Minister assure me that he will express to both the Assad regime and the Russians the high importance that the international community places on dealing with this urgent humanitarian crisis in the next few weeks?

Mr Ellwood: I am happy to do so, and that can be articulated through the UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura at the talks that will recommence on 7 March.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): May I draw the Minister’s attention to the reports from the very few international journalists on the ground in Aleppo and elsewhere in Syria that many people, particularly the rebels who are fighting against the regime, are not in favour of the ceasefire precisely because they believe that the regime and Russia will use it to take ground by stealth? That only emphasises the importance of getting aid into those communities and holding the regime to account.

May I take this opportunity to make a request of the Minister and the Government? As we have moved into territory previously held by Daesh, we have discovered at least 35 mass graves in those communities. The UK is a world leader in forensic technology and specialists, and many groups such as the Aegis Trust would like the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development to fund and encourage those forensic experts to get on the ground, where it is safe to do so, and uncover and record the terrible crimes of Daesh and the Syrian regime.

Mr Ellwood: I will answer just the latter point, for brevity. My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we pay tribute to the British capability, which I have seen with my own eyes in places such as Srebrenica. It is important that we gain the intelligence that is needed to hold these people to account, so that the verification processes actually take place. That can only be done, as we saw in Ramadi, once the area has been made safe from all the booby traps. That work is commencing as we speak.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): May I say that the Minister has comported himself well at the Dispatch Box today? If there is no cessation of violence in this instance, is there a plan B?

Mr Ellwood: I think it is best to avoid discussion of a plan B. We need to make this work, because the situation has gone on for too long. I began by saying that we are now in our sixth year. There is a recognition that the international community is coming together around the table for the first time. We have not previously had a situation in which Iran and Saudi Arabia—and, indeed, Russia and the United States—have been at the table. We are facing a number of difficulties and complexities, but that should not mean that we do not try to find solutions for the stability of Syria in the longer term.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Speaker, a dydd gwyl Dewi hapus iawn i chi. Happy St David’s day. Yesterday, Reuters reported that two weeks ago in Brussels, Defence Ministers in the US-led coalition met to discuss ground operations against Daesh. Will the Minister update the House on those negotiations?

Mr Ellwood: Huge success has been achieved and huge progress made in Iraq. We were able to create an indigenous capability. We were able to support and build an Iraqi force, which was able to liberate Ramadi. The next step will be the liberation of Mosul. The work that the Peshmerga is now doing—again, with British assistance—is going well. We are stopping the movement of funding to Daesh as well. Daesh is being squeezed. The consequence of that, which we should be concerned about, is that as we squeeze Daesh in Iraq and Syria, it is starting to pop up in other parts of the world, not least in Libya. We need to be aware of that.
Points of Order

1.26 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are the foremost guardian of the convention that the House of Commons must come first. My hon. Friend the Minister is a most charming and able Minister, but I have asked him why the Foreign Secretary is not here. I quite understand—he is a very busy man—if he is abroad or ill, but surely we must establish the convention that when there is an urgent question or a statement, unless it deals with a particular, small part of a Department, the Secretary of State should be here. I would hope that you make that clear to Departments.

Mr Speaker: I must say to the hon. Gentleman that the position is that it is for the Government to decide whom to field. My responsibility is to adjudicate upon applications for permission to put urgent questions. I do that every week, and sometimes several times a week. I cannot require any particular Minister to attend, and it must remain for the Government to make the judgment.

That said, the hon. Gentleman is a very senior and respected figure in this House, and he has just made a point that increasingly I have heard made recently by others. I have not made a statistical study, but there are suggestions that the frequency with which senior Ministers appear to answer urgent questions is declining. It is in no sense to cast an aspersion on the Minister, who knows his brief and has assiduously attended to the matters raised today, simply to note that point in passing. I would hope that senior Ministers wanted, and felt a duty, to answer questions from Members of Parliament. We do not have a separation of powers, as in the United States; Ministers sit in, and are answerable to, this House. None, frankly, should ever forget it.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Happy St David’s day. Yesterday, in a majestic performance at the Dispatch Box, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General confirmed to the House that Cabinet Ministers who oppose the European Union and support a no vote in the referendum can get access to Government documents on the EU referendum if they use the Freedom of Information Act. Today, we read on the front page of the Daily Mail that the Paymaster General is going to scrap the commission looking at the Freedom of Information Act. Mr Speaker, have you had notice from the Paymaster General that he is seeking to make a statement to the House to explain the very unusual behaviour of the Government in shelving their own commission?

Mr Speaker: I am bound to say to the hon. Gentleman that I have received no such indication that any Minister has any such intention. The matter to which the hon. Gentleman refers is a matter of ongoing interest. He and others, who are notably terrier-like and indefatigable in pursuit of their ends, will require no encouragement from me to deploy such parliamentary devices as are available to secure the matter further attention, if that is what they want.

If there are no further points of order—the House’s palate has been satisfied on that front, at any rate for today—we can move to the presentation of a Bill.

The Minister for Security (Mr John Hayes) rose—

Mr Speaker: For the benefit of those who attend to our proceedings, the convention is that a Minister nods and I note that, with some ceremony, we have received the due nod from the Minister for Security.

BILL PRESENTED

Investigatory Powers Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Theresa May, the Prime Minister, Secretary Philip Hammond, Secretary Michael Fallon, Secretary David Mundell, Secretary Theresa Villiers, the Attorney General, Robert Buckland and Mr John Hayes presented a Bill to make provision about the interception of communications, equipment interference and the acquisition and retention of communications data, bulk personal datasets and other information; to make provision about the treatment of material held as a result of such interception, equipment interference or acquisition or retention; to establish the Investigatory Powers Commissioner and other Judicial Commissioners and make provision about them and other oversight arrangements; to make further provision about investigatory powers and national security; to amend sections 3 and 5 of the Intelligence Services Act 1994; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 143) with explanatory notes (Bill 143-EN).
Devolution (Bank Holidays) (Wales)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.31 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to devolve to Welsh Ministers responsibility for the determination of specified bank holidays in Wales; and for connected purposes.

I am lucky enough to be bringing this issue before the House on St David’s day, when people throughout Wales and the diaspora throughout the UK and indeed the world will be celebrating the life of Dewi Sant and our Welsh cultural identity. May I wish you, Mr Speaker, and everybody, dydd gwyl Dewi hapus—happy St David’s day?

St David or Dewi Sant is a renowned and inspirational figure in Wales. He was responsible for spreading Christianity throughout much of western Britain. He was the Archbishop of Wales, and was a fundamental figure in the establishment of religion in our country. He had particular links to my constituency, being the grandson of King Ceredig, the founder of the kingdom of Ceredigion, while his mother, Saint Non, was born in the village of Llanon. It is said that St David was educated at the Henfynyw monastery, near the village of Ffos-y-ffin, in the centre of Ceredigion. It was in the village of Llanddewi Brefi in 550 AD, at a raucous meeting of the synod of the Welsh church, that David, finding it difficult to make himself heard, placed a cloth on the ground and the earth rose to form a mound on which he could stand and preach. That miracle of St David put the village of Llanddewi Brefi on the map which he could stand and preach. That miracle of St David put the village of Llanddewi Brefi on the map.

It should therefore be no surprise that the calls for making St David’s day a public holiday in Wales are particularly strong in my constituency. His contribution to Wales cannot and should not be ignored. Today, many people will publicly celebrate dydd Dewi Sant in my constituency and throughout Wales, with celebratory parades, school pupils wearing traditional Welsh costumes, the singing of Welsh songs and the recitation of poetry. People will take part in eisteddfodau and cymanfaoedd canu—singing festivals—displaying some of Wales’s rich cultural traditions. We will see celebrations of Welsh culture in London, with children from the London Welsh School, the London Welsh Centre and the Wales in London group doing their bit to promote Wales and the life of Dewi Sant. The St David’s day service in St Mary Undercroft ended a few moments ago, and I am glad to see that the House of Commons catering department has risen to the occasion by providing fabulous Welsh cuisine procured from Wales, which I would encourage all hon. Members to experience.

It is no coincidence that I am using this opportunity to pursue the issue of devolving the power to set public holidays on this very important day for Wales. The issue of St David’s day and the ability of Wales to designate public holidays has been raised many times over many years by many people from across the political spectrum. I raised it in a Westminster Hall debate in 2011, and that was followed in the same year by the introduction by the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) of a Bill to make St George’s day and St David’s day public holidays in England and Wales respectively.

I want to make it clear that the Bill does not ask the House to authorise or designate St David’s day as a public holiday, however much I hope it will become one, but, in the spirit of devolution, to ensure that our Senedd—our Assembly—has the powers to decide that matter. Despite the numerous calls to devolve this power, that has not yet come to pass, unfortunately, despite the fact that responsibility for public holidays is devolved to Scotland and that St Patrick’s day has been a public holiday in Ireland since 1903. St Patrick’s day has been used to build Ireland’s profile and to encourage tourism, which has provided a huge boost to its economy.

The Irish Government specifically set up the St Patrick’s festival group, which has aimed to make the celebration one of the finest in the world, to encourage innovation and creativity, to provide the opportunity for those of Irish descent to become involved and to project a positive, forward-looking image of Ireland to the rest of the world. Should such a power be devolved and should the Welsh Government make St David’s day a public holiday, there is every reason to believe that our national festival could be very proactively marketed throughout the world in a more robust way than it has been to date. It would provide a fantastic opportunity for a small country such as ours to make its mark, and it seems preposterous to me that the Senedd cannot make such a decision.

I acknowledge that there have been some concerns from parts of the business community about the possible designation of St David’s day as a public holiday, but that should not stop us giving the responsibility to Wales for the Welsh Government to consult on it and come to a considered decision. We could follow the precedent of Scotland. St Andrew’s day was designated a bank holiday by the Scottish Parliament in the St Andrew’s Day Bank Holiday (Scotland) Act 2007. At the time, concerns were raised about the possible negative impact that devolving the power would have on businesses and the Scottish economy, but they seem to have been unfounded. It would be a very strange state of affairs if anybody called for that to be reversed. After consultation, the Scottish Government chose to allow banks to decide whether to close on St Andrew’s day and companies to decide whether to observe it as a public holiday. There has since been growing calls and growing support for companies to recognise the holiday fully. Critically, that decision was taken in Scotland.

In Wales, we have similar levels of support for creating a new public holiday. A poll taken at the time of the Scottish decision showed that 87% of people in Wales wanted St David’s day to become a bank holiday. Some 65% of those surveyed stated that they were willing to sacrifice another bank holiday to see St David’s day officially designated. Indeed, my thanks should go to ITV Wales, which in highlighting the Bill has undertaken an online poll. As of 10 o’clock this morning, over 90% of respondents agree that St David’s day should be a bank holiday.

Such support is also seen in all of the parties in the National Assembly, many of whom have manifesto commitments to have the power devolved, and others who provided evidence to the Silk commission called for the power to be given to the Senedd. From the very beginning of the life of the National Assembly, Welsh
political opinion, as well as growing public opinion, has been united in its call for St David's day to become a public holiday.

In 2011, it looked as though the UK Government might finally, as part of their tourism strategy—after pressure, I would candidly suggest, from the Liberal Democrats—consider giving the Welsh Assembly the power to move the spring bank holiday from early May to 1 March. However, nothing came of that, despite great political support for it in Wales. The Welsh Government wrote to the Wales Office in 2013 to call for the power to be devolved, but they were rebuffed, apparently by the then Secretary of State for Wales, the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones). Despite public and political support rivalling the support shown in Scotland, such calls have continued to fall on deaf ears, with successive UK Governments refusing to consider devolving the power to Wales.

If the power continues to be reserved to Westminster, it seems unlikely that St David's day will become a public holiday any time soon, despite the huge support for that in our country. Is it not now time for the Welsh people to be able to decide whether it is right that St David's day becomes a public holiday in Wales, rather than that being decided—and rejected—in Whitehall? With only eight public holidays in the UK and in Wales, we have among the fewest of any country in the world. Wales should be able to choose whether to create a new public holiday or to replace it with another. I feel that that decision should be made, through our Senedd, by the people of Wales.

Let me finish by repeating the words of Dewi Sant: “Do the little things that you have seen me do and heard about. I will walk the path that our fathers have trod before us.” “Do the little things” or “Gwnewch y pethau bychain” has become a well-known phrase in Wales, and this is all that many of us in Wales are asking for. We are asking for Wales to be given the power that others already have—the power for Wales to choose whether and how to make St David's day a public holiday, and to celebrate his life and our Welsh national identity how we choose. With this Bill, we would be able to do those little things that could have a very big impact on Wales. I urge the House to support this call.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Mr Mark Williams, Gerald Jones, Liz Saville Roberts, Hywel Williams, Jonathan Edwards, Huw Irranca-Davies, Albert Owen, John Pugh and Carolyn Harris present the Bill.

Mr Mark Williams accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March, and to be printed (Bill 145).
Even though the real reduction was just 10% over the four years, it is hard to find anyone who does not believe that the FCO’s capacity was damaged in the process. Our predecessors described the Foreign Office as a machine stretched to the limit, with key posts left unfilled because staff of the necessary calibre were needed for more immediate crises; overseas posts at junior levels lost, reducing the opportunity for staff to accumulate the experience that is essential for service at higher levels within the organisation; and reductions in UK-based staff at many overseas posts, denying those who remained time to leave the diplomatic bubble and gather a sense of the real currents in society around the country in which they served.

Overall, the headcount of UK-based staff has reduced by 10% between 2011 and now, which seems perverse at a time when the Department has been under such policy pressure and suffered such overstretch. To some degree, the reduction in UK-based staff was mitigated by the recruitment of locally engaged staff who, in many cases, have brought a depth of local knowledge that it would be difficult for a London-based employee ever to acquire. However, many of them happen to be British people who are based overseas and then formally become locally engaged staff. Although the average cost of such people is one third of UK-based staff, it is not a straight saving, because such replacements do not come at zero cost. I have already heard troubling reports of unintended consequences arising from such things as locally engaged staff not being cleared to the same security level as UK-based staff.

To use Tunisia as an example in advance of the Committee’s visit to Cairo and Tunis next week, I applaud the FCO’s swift consular response to the terrorist attack in Sousse in June 2015, but I have heard that the subsequent counter-terrorism analysis was complicated by a lack of UK-based staff who were cleared to the necessary level. That analysis was of great significance, because it will have played a role in the FCO’s decision to advise against all but essential travel to the entire country—a country where tourism contributes directly and indirectly to a large proportion of GDP and is a major source of foreign currency. Tunisia is a fragile country that has undergone its fair share of volatility since it sparked the Arab spring, and we all have an interest in nurturing its continued stability.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling case for investing in our diplomatic service. Does he share my concern that the cuts are not only leading to a lack of spread across the world and impacting on the standing of the United Kingdom globally, but affecting the expertise and analytical capabilities of the diplomatic service in respect of the information it feeds back to the United Kingdom?

Crispin Blunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have made that point before and will make it again in respect of the inquiry we are conducting into the intervention in Libya. Just how deep was the knowledge on the basis of which we decided to intervene? It is the depth of knowledge that has been lost.

Another price that is being paid is that locally engaged staff do not really understand the UK context. It has been put to me that the quality of the reports that are coming through is not quite what it was because they are not addressed to the needs of the Ministers at whom they are aimed. The difficulty is that very overstretched UK-based staff in a post are, in addition, having to oversee the work of the locally engaged employees.

Returning to the issue of Tunisia, I accept that the security of our citizens must be a Government priority and that they cannot commend travel unless they have confidence that our citizens will be reasonably safe, but this decision had serious consequences for Tunisia’s stability and the security of the region. We must therefore be completely confident that we can make informed decisions, rather than simply defensive decisions because of an absence of capability.

Reports are, of course, the standard mechanism by which Select Committees express their views. I believe that Committees can miss opportunities by not getting inside the decision making cycle, or by devoting our energies to conducting retrospective analyses after policy has been formed and executed. The Government should welcome input at an early stage from an informed, cross-party Committee that could make practical, forward-looking suggestions, rather than just telling the Government where they went wrong.

We published our report on the Budget in October last year, almost exactly a month before the spending review, and we made just one recommendation: “We recommend that the Treasury protect the FCO budget for the period covered by the 2015 Spending Review, with a view to increasing rather than cutting the funds available to support the diplomatic work on which the country’s security and prosperity depend.”

I am delighted that our recommendations were accepted, and that the settlement reflected our central recommendation.

We spent much of our first few evidence sessions looking at how the Foreign Office was preparing for the spending review, and at what scope there was for it to absorb further cuts of the scale already imposed over the previous four years. The Foreign Secretary gave oral evidence twice, and we tried to get a sense of his priorities and what he would seek to preserve. We then took evidence from Sir Simon McDonald, the new permanent under-secretary, and his senior management team, to try to understand the grit and detail of what might be achieved and how if—God forbid—savings of 25% or even 40% were required. That gloomy environment perhaps reflected our rather defensive recommendation, which was obviously designed to hold the current position, but the Committee clearly believes that more resources are needed to support our diplomacy.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): As a member of the previous Foreign Affairs Committee, may I suggest that trying to make unnecessary savings can prove to be a false economy in the longer term? If we do not invest in expertise and analytical skills, we could end up making errors that can cost a lot more than if we had a proper view of things in the first place. The extreme example of that is avoiding conflict, which is much cheaper than conflict itself.

Crispin Blunt: My hon. Friend makes an entirely valid point. He sat on the Committee in the last Parliament and in this one, and he will know about the diminution of our expertise, for example on Russia. When he and I
were soldiers back in the 1980s there was a wealth of expertise about the Soviet Union, but that has simply been stripped away. When faced with a crisis in Crimea and Ukraine, the level and depth of our knowledge were certainly a handicap.

When looking at future Committee reports and how we might influence future events, I hope that we will be able to report with authority and fulfil a much requested public need about Brexit. The Committee is conducting an inquiry into the costs and benefits of European Union membership for Britain's role in the world—whether we stay in the EU or whether we leave. Hon. Members will already have found that people are asking where they can turn for independent analysis and who will give them the facts. Unhappily, the Government have placed themselves in a position where they are unable to give an independent view, since the entire institution is placed firmly on one side of the campaign. Happily, however, I preside over a Committee of 11, and the publicly expressed views of my Committee are balanced at five each on either side of the question.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If my hon. Friend is seeking a cure for insomnia, may I refer him to my speech on Friday when I spoke on this subject for an hour in support of the Bill sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), which would set up an independent audit of the pros and cons of leaving the EU? That is what we need. Perhaps the Office for Budget Responsibility should be given that job. We accused the Labour Government of fiddling the figures before the Budget, so why not ask an independent body to give a genuine audit?

Crispin Blunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I recall that it is my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White), who served on the previous Committees on Arms Export Controls under the Stakhanovite chairmanship of Sir John Stanley, who is taking up that role. I am confident that he will do it extremely well.

Hon. Members will know that if I can chair a Committee that produces a unanimous report and has the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) agreeing on factors around our European Union membership, we will have done a singular service in producing a piece of analysis that everyone can have confidence in.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman raises a good point, and I look forward to working with him in trying to bring the five of us on either side of the argument together to produce that report. Does he agree that one of our primary goals is to ensure that people in the House, and beyond, are as well informed as they possibly can be about the European Union referendum ahead of 23 June?

Crispin Blunt: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and we look forward with interest to the motivation of the Scottish National party, and how it will vote, given its differing attitudes to the differing Unions in which Scotland finds itself.

Anyone attending this debate might ask why, if the Foreign Office was one of the winners from the spending review—or at least not a loser—we have sought this debate. My reply is that no one should underestimate the scale of the challenges that the UK and its allies are facing in the world today. Even with a protected budget, the Foreign Office will struggle to address those challenges. Of course we have a range of capabilities to deal with direct threats to our national security, including armed forces, diplomacy, economic policy, cyber-operations, and covert means, but in terms of sheer value for money, it is diplomacy, and the capacity to bring crises to a peaceful resolution in partnership with others, that must be the preferred solution. A diplomatic solution to a crisis, rather than one that descends into the use of armed force saves an absolute fortune, as well as avoiding the huge humanitarian cost that accompanies a failure to preserve the peace. It is my view that we should increase the Foreign Office budget to enhance that capacity and help to head off crises before they flare up.

The threats to the UK's security and wellbeing are at an unprecedented level. As we said in our report, we cannot recall a more complex and challenging policy-making environment in recent decades—an environment that includes Syria, Daesh, Libya, Russia, the South China sea, Israel, Palestine, North Korea, Iran and Turkey, to name but a few.
That is before we take into account the requirements of the other two pillars of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office: the agenda for prosperity and consular services. In its response to our report, the Office acknowledges that there will be “new work, including increasing spending on the Overseas Territories and hosting the presidency of the EU in 2017.” That might be an interesting presidency if we are on the way out after 23 June.

Inexplicably, however, the Government’s response says nothing about potentially the greatest call on its resources: a British exit from the European Union. If the country votes out on 23 June, a huge effort will be needed to disentangle the United Kingdom from its existing commitments and to work on new trade arrangements, to name but one element of the work that will need to be undertaken. A very large part of that effort will fall on the Foreign Office, yet the Committee has found little or no evidence that the British civil service is making any sort of contingency plan in the event of a Brexit. We now have a date for the referendum, and Brexit is not a remote possibility but a very real prospect.

I therefore urge Ministers and their officials to begin planning, and not just in outline, for the consequences of a decision by the British people to leave the European Union. It would not just be a question of drafting in a few extra people to prepare new treaties. We will need to strengthen our bilateral relationships by increasing our presence in larger EU member states, reopening subordinate posts in eastern Europe and central Asia that have been closed or downsized, and picking up capabilities, particularly trade language skills, that are currently the competence of the European Union. We should at least understand what capabilities, that are currently the competence of the five years, and picking up capabilities, particularly trade presence in larger EU member states, reopening subordinate posts in eastern Europe and central Asia that have been closed or downsized, and picking up capabilities, particularly trade language skills, that are currently the competence of the European Union. We should at least understand what the bill will be and prepare to address it if it happens.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): On the hon. Gentleman’s point about increasing the number of personnel to deal with Brexit, the Committee recently said that about a quarter of staff in the middle east, eastern Europe and central Asia do not have the requisite language skills, and that the number of people who have those language skills is decreasing. That is another way in which the strength of the Foreign Office to deal with international issues is being reduced.

Crispin Blunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right—she understands those issues extremely well from her work on the Foreign Affairs Committee and more widely before joining it. That loss of language skills is partly a reflection of just how stretched the FCO is in getting people to the right place, and getting the best people into vacancies to cover the policy challenges we face. An office that is not stretched so tautly has the capacity to get the language skills of its staff up to the necessary standard. Until now, those skills have been the envy of every other diplomatic service in the world. In the last Parliament, it was the priority of William Hague as Foreign Secretary to address that. Serious measures were put in place to try to do so, but the evidence the Committee is taking shows that if it is getting better, it is doing so in a minute way that does not reflect the need for real improvement. That reflects just how tautly the office is being managed under the current budget conditions.

There will be more pressure on the capital budget than usual. The Government response to our report points out that the Foreign Office capital budget will remain “flat”. It says that the FCO will need to fund requirements that cannot be met from the capital budget by disposing of assets, and warns that it may need to call on the Treasury reserve for some large projects. The Foreign Office quite rightly is expected to achieve value for money when disposing of assets, but the ability to do so will partly depend on market forces. As we know from the FCO supplementary estimate, it has already had to call on the Treasury reserve to cover a shortfall that it says is “due to adverse market conditions in the Far East”.

The FCO IT system, Firecrest, is failing and presents a serious operational risk. Major investment is needed, but that has been stalled during the spending review process. The FCO is going to have to fund its tech overhaul programme from its existing budget: difficult choices will have to be made on procurement, bearing in mind the need for resilience and the particular security requirements of the Department. Careful project management will be needed, and I can only point out that the whole of the public service does not exactly have a shining record in that field. I hope the Foreign Office can help to redress that.

My second key point concerns official development assistance expenditure and the need to rationalise resource allocation. The Committee highlights in the report our uneasiness at the consequences of depending ever more on expenditure that qualifies as official development assistance, and which therefore scores against the Government’s commitment to invest at least 0.7% of gross national income in international development. That risks, and indeed is, skewing the Department’s expenditure away from countries that are not eligible for ODA spending, regardless of where our foreign policy interests lie. For instance, 97% of the funds available under the new human rights funding programme, the Magna Carta fund, are for spending in ODA-eligible countries. When we queried that in oral evidence with the Minister and her officials, we were given the impression that there was some flexibility to divert funding towards non-ODA countries, but we need clear answers. Trying to replace the significant sums the Government have put forward for human rights in the Magna Carta fund with very constrained bilateral funds will not wash. It would be quite unacceptable and counterproductive for human rights programme funding to be virtually denied in non-ODA-eligible countries such as Russia and Israel, and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. I hope the Minister can give me some reassurance on that point.

Human rights expenditure is not the only example of how ODA eligibility can determine the Foreign Office’s activities. The current chief operating officer, Deborah Bronnert, told us that the Foreign Office’s non-ODA budget was under particular pressure, and that if there were to be cutbacks in the overseas network, it would have to look first at cutbacks in subordinate posts in developed countries. It hardly plays well with our prosperity agenda if that is where we need to go in terms of our trade and economic relations.

The British Council, which plays a unique role in promoting an understanding by different peoples and nations of what the UK can offer, faces the possibility of losing all grant in aid for work in countries that are
not ODA-eligible. It is looking to cross-subsidize to some extent from other areas of its operation, but the net effect is a decline of our soft power and influence in several growing economies and countries, not least where there are political and human rights concerns.

I have similar concerns about the move within the Government to more pooled funding between Departments. The conflict, stability and security fund, which is currently worth £1.033 billion per year, will increase to £1.33 billion by 2019-20, and a new prosperity fund is being created, worth £1.3 billion. Substantial sums of money have been allocated following a process of negotiation between Departments, and I welcome the concept of a more holistic and integrated approach to funding where Departments are working in different ways towards the same ultimate aims, but the Committee should look carefully at how the FCO fares, for instance when sharing the conflict, stability and security fund with two Departments whose budgets as a proportion of total Government expenditure are both protected.

Finally, the Foreign Office delayed its response to our report until it had received its settlement letter from the Treasury, but I was disappointed that the FCO did not supply the settlement letter, which I understand sets out more detail of the sums available to the Foreign Office from year to year within the period covered by the spending review. In fact, none of the departmental settlement letters has been published. At the moment, we just have rounded figures for budgets for 2015-16 to 2019-20, without any lower-level detail. Will the Minister therefore undertake to supply the Foreign Office settlement letter to the Committee, so that we may publish it and place that essential information in the public domain?

My conclusion relates to the shape of the Foreign Office in the years to come. In his letter responding to our report, the Foreign Secretary said:

“There is more that can be done to strengthen the FCO and build up its world class capabilities. To help achieve this, I have commissioned an internal review of the FCO exploring how we can be more expert, agile and focused on our key priorities. The review will set out a vision of the organisation the FCO should be by 2020.”

I invite the Minister to tell us a little more about that review. Will it be a fundamental review of how the Foreign Office is structured, how priorities are ordered and how staff are deployed; or will it be a motherhood and apple pie statement of vision and aims, full of things no one could disagree with?

In conclusion, the Office remains overstretched and underfunded for the tasks it faces. Its actual funding base is dysfunctional, and if it does not actually distort policy decisions, it certainly means that resource allocation is no longer aligned with actual British interests.

2.10 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am going to do something very unusual, very different and possibly subversive here today with this speech. On one of the days set aside for the consideration of the estimates of this House, I am going to actually speak about estimates. When I was researching my contribution, the one thing I was told that I must not do was to raise the issue of estimates during estimates day debates. What other House in the world would have such an absurd principle of debate? What other modern Parliament would even start to consider doing its business on the basis of such an absurd and ridiculous ruling?

Estimates are not about the allocation of pencils and ruler to the civil service, or even the price of beer in Strangers Bar. The estimates process is this House having to give its authority to the Government’s spending plans. This is what we are doing, in accordance with Standing Order No. 54 of this House, in the three days that we have been given to debate the three large estimates documents I have here. However, they are the one thing we are not supposed to debate! This is absolutely and utterly absurd and bizarre, and it has to change. This cannot go on. Something as important as this has to be considered.

How did we get here? Two centuries ago, the House actually debated and considered every single estimate in the House. Every piece of departmental spend was debated to the nth degree, considered and voted on. Now, we do absolutely nothing. This House has abrogated its responsibility for looking at departmental spend, and that is utterly unsustainable.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman try to fit his more general point about estimates into the specific estimate on Foreign and Commonwealth Office expenditure we are debating?

Pete Wishart: Well, the estimates are the estimates, Madam Deputy Speaker. I struggle to think that when we talk about the estimates, the totality of the Foreign Office budget would fit into what we are actually debating and considering. This is a day set aside for the consideration of estimates. We have to debate this. We are abrogating our responsibilities as parliamentarians if we fail to have some sort of say and some sort of discussion and debate about how this House does its business.

Sir Edward Leigh: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is a most important point. When I was Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee—I am now a member of the Procedure Committee—I produced a report for the Chancellor on this. What the hon. Gentleman says is quite true and he is doing a great service to the House. The fact is that we spend £600 billion of the people’s money every year, but the one thing we are not allowed to talk about on estimates days is estimates. The hon. Gentleman is therefore making a fundamentally important point. When the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) tried to talk about estimates on an estimates day a couple of years ago, unbelievably he was ruled out of order. You have the power now, Madam Deputy Speaker, to say that on estimates days we are allowed to talk about estimates. You can give the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) authority to carry on giving his speech.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman. For that point of order, but we are debating a specific motion on the Order Paper, which is Foreign and Commonwealth Office estimates. The hon. Gentleman has been a parliamentarian for a very long time. He understands how this works and he may feel that this is an injustice. There are other places where this can be debated, but today this is specifically about a very important estimate, which is the expenditure of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.
There are plenty of ways in which the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) can debate estimates more generally within this framework, but he must stick to what is on the Order Paper. We are debating a motion and it is very specifically on FCO expenditure. If he can do that, he will not be ruled out of order. If he does not, then I am afraid he will be.

Pete Wishart: I will make an attempt to stay in order, Madam Deputy Speaker. According to Standing Order No. 54, three days of each parliamentary session is to be allocated for the consideration of estimates. I am attempting to uphold that Standing Order. One of the days on which we are allowed to debate estimates is today. I therefore seek your ruling as to why I cannot debate the estimates on one of the days set aside for estimates.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The answer, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is that this is not a general debate on estimates. This debate is on one particular estimate relating to FCO expenditure. That is, therefore, what we are debating here today. He also knows that the Procedure Committee is the place to go to for answers to more specific questions. There are other ways to have debates on the principle of estimates debates. Today, however, we have on the Order Paper the specific estimate for the FCO. That is what we are here to debate.

Sir Edward Leigh: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I just ask how I, or any other hon. Member, can question the Government on £600 billion of expenditure? By the way, under the Barnett formula we spend directly affects the spend in Scotland. How can I start giving a speech about all this money we are spending?

Madam Deputy Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman knows—he has been here a very long time—there are Treasury questions, Budget day, parliamentary questions, letters to Ministers, Adjournment debates and so on. There are any number of avenues by which these matters can be debated. Today, we are debating Foreign and Commonwealth Office expenditure on this particular estimates day.

With that, I think that is enough. If the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire wants me to rule him out of order I can do so, but if he can just stick to the FCO expenditure and bring his points in under that he will remain in order.

Pete Wishart: I will give it one last bash, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let us hope we can make a little bit more progress. The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is absolutely right. This House has to be given the opportunity to debate this. It is critically and crucially important. If we cannot do it on days set aside for estimates, we have to determine when and how we can do it. If I can just explain why this is important, you can rule me out of order all you want, Madam Deputy Speaker.

This is important for us in the Scottish National party because we have been invited by the Government, by the Leader of the House, to investigate, debate and look at the estimates process to determine the issues around Barnett consequentials, which you and Mr Speaker have to rule—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that is enough. I think we have had the debate. The hon. Gentleman has had a debate on the Floor of the House about estimates in general, but we are debating, scrutinising and looking at a very important particular estimate on Foreign and Commonwealth Office expenditure. If the hon. Gentleman can keep his debating points to that matter, I will allow him to continue; otherwise, he will be out of order. It is a particular estimate day, not estimates day. It is a particular day on which we are debating FCO estimates. If he would like to continue I will allow him to do so; otherwise, I will call the next speaker.

Pete Wishart indicated dissent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call John Baron.

2.18 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): There is an old Army adage, which has served the British Army well, that says time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted. I suggest that it could serve the Government well going forward when it comes to expenditure on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Cuts to the Office by previous Governments on both sides of the House have led to staff shortages, which have contributed to a series of errors that have cost us dear. On the one hand, I congratulate the Government on protecting the budget in real terms; that is a backstop we have not had hitherto and is very much to be welcomed. At the same time, I urge the Government to look to increase the budget in real terms, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) has eloquently suggested. If the Government seriously think that cost savings in this area work, I would suggest that all the evidence shows that to be a false economy indeed, and for a variety of reasons.

First and foremost, the false economy does not reflect the importance of how we make foreign policy in this country. That is in contrast to the United States, where foreign policy making is much more of a diffuse process, with academics, career diplomats, think-tanks and politicians all much more widely involved. In this country, on the other hand, the pyramid is much narrower and policy making is structured and put into place by a smaller number of people and organisations—primarily senior people at the top of the FCO, senior people at No. 10 and perhaps a few others. It is therefore terribly important that all the components of our foreign policy making are firing on all cylinders, because if a particular part is not working, given the smaller number of components in the process, that can have a disproportionate effect on overall policy and its consequences.

There is no shortage of examples showing that we have not done as well as we should have in responding to international crises and other incidents that have perhaps left us floundering. With the Arab spring, for example, there were so few Arabists in the FCO that we had to call them out of retirement. When it came to Russia’s annexation of the Crimea, for another example, I think I am right in saying—my right hon. Friend the
Minister for Europe will correct me if he so wishes—that we did not have one Kremlinologist in the FCO, which perhaps contributed to the somewhat unconvincing response. I suggest to the Government that our interventions over the last 12 years or so have suffered from a lack of analytical skill and expertise, which has been very costly to this country.

**Stephen Gethins:** The hon. Gentleman has a long track record on these issues, and I am particularly grateful for his work in the Foreign Affairs Committee. He will probably be more gentle on the Government than I will. If we look at Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq, among other places, the lack of proper interrogation of the facts has been a disaster.

**Mr Baron:** I made the mistake of not finishing my sentence; next time I will finish it. I was about to say that my examples included Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and, I would suggest, Syria. In Iraq, there can be no doubt that we went to war on a false premise: there were no WMD. We were all deceived; the job of Chilcot is to determine whether No. 10 intentionally deceived us.

On Afghanistan, I supported the initial deployment in 2001 to rid the country of al-Qaeda, and there is strong evidence to suggest that we succeeded in that objective in the very early years. Where it went disastrously wrong—this takes us back to the fact that we did not fully understand events on the ground—was when we allowed the mission to morph into nation-building. We went into Helmand without fully realising what it involved, and we certainly under-resourced our operations, which was a bad mistake.

In Libya, we knocked down the door—that was the relatively easy bit—but the country has turned out to be a complete and utter shambles, in part because we failed to understand that the opposition to Gaddafi would splinter into 100-plus groups with different objectives. Anybody who knows anything about the region, or who has visited the country or travelled through it, should know that everything is tradeable in the bazaar. Also, given that the situation was so fast moving, the idea that we could have stopped the rebels from falling into the hands of al-Qaeda, al-Nusra or other extremists was pure make-believe.

Then, within a couple of years, the Government, having been stopped by the House from intervening in a key vote in 2013, again proposed to intervene—but against the rebels. I would not be so unkind as to suggest that we swapped sides in a civil war within two years, but to the general public, it damn well nearly looks like that. It well illustrates how we have failed to analyse the situation correctly.

In the brief time left to me, I would argue that in many respects our interventions have been a distraction. I, for one—like many Members on both sides; some are in their places today—have long advocated the need to spend more on defence. The military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and travelled through Syria have, perhaps, distracted us from the greater threat of nation states, not necessarily friendly to the west, rearming and reasserting their power and influence. One thinks immediately of Russia and China, but there are others as well.

To those who suggest that the straits of Hormuz or the South China seas are far away and of little significance to us, I say that a country based to such an extent on maritime trade—about 90% of our trade comes by sea—would certainly know about it if those straits or seas were ever blocked. My suggestion is that we have been distracted and that that is partly a function of the fact that we are not investing enough in what I call our ears and eyes—in other words, our ability to understand what is happening out there.

We must have a margin of safety or comfort as regards our capability, because no one can confidently predict where the next trouble spot is going to be. History is littered with examples of our facing the wrong way. I suggest that without that margin of comfort, that margin of safety, in our analytical capability, we may well be caught short again if we have not made
the necessary investment. I suggest that, without that
investment, we make expensive mistakes—indeed, we
have made them—and that it is therefore a false economy
to talk about savings, particularly when the budget is so
small relative to Government expenditure generally. If I
may take the point to the extreme, avoiding unnecessary
conflict is vastly cheaper than committing ourselves to
conflict that is costly in terms of both lives and treasure.

We often talk about hard power in the House, but
perhaps we do not talk enough about soft power, which
is increasingly important. In the present information
age, those who win the argument will be just as important
as those who win the conflict. This is about a battle of
ideas, a battle of ideologies. It is about persuading
others to want what we want, rather than just rattling
the sabre, which—as we have seen so many times in our
recent history—can often be counterproductive. We do
not attach enough importance to soft power in this
country, certainly not when it comes to the making of
foreign policy.

There are clear examples of our putting our soft
power capability at risk. Past cuts to the BBC World
Service have hindered our ability to reach out to people;
the World Service budget has been transferred from the
FCO’s ambit, but that was one example before the
transfer.

An example that currently sits in the FCO is the
British Council. That venerable organisation is doing
tremendous work in spreading the word, encouraging
people to want what we want, providing an educational
service, and trying to bring peoples together to improve
understanding for the benefit of all concerned, but what
are we doing? We are making cuts there. What is the
British Council having to do as a result? It is having to
become even more commercial in trying to make up for
those cuts.

Members may think that a 10% cut is very little, but
given that 10% is sometimes the profit margin, the
British Council must achieve a 100% increase in its
revenue when engaging in commercial activities to make
up for that cut. We, as a country, must think again
about short-sightedness of that kind, because it is not
serving us well—and, I would argue, not serving the
international community well.

We need to ensure that our ears and eyes are working,
because when they are not, we tend to make expensive
mistakes in the world. The fact that we have not properly
funded our analytical skills and our capabilities, and
have not been as well-sighted as we should have been,
has certainly contributed—although it has not been the
only reason—to a series of errors that have proved
exceedingly costly in lives first and foremost, but also in
terms of treasure. That brings me back to the point
about false economies. It is a false economy to make
cuts in our ears and eyes—our Foreign and Commonwealth
Office capabilities—if, as a result, we then blunder into
interventions that cost us dearly in lives and treasure.

I am pleased to see that my right hon. Friend the
Minister for Europe is present. Through him, I urge the
Government to increase expenditure on the FCO in real
terms. We will be better sighted for it, and will make
fewer costly errors.

2.34 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire)
(SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for
Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). He made a very
detailed, perceptive and interesting speech, which I
thoroughly enjoyed.

The cut in funding for the Foreign Office, on top of
the 10% budget cut since 2010, is directly contrary to
the United Kingdom’s key strategic interests, and might
prevent the Department from effectively addressing serious
organisational issues of its own. We cannot properly
address the threats to our security from Daesh solely by
dropping bombs in Syria, Libya or Iraq, and threats to
our economy from events in China and in the eurozone
cannot simply be washed away by the Treasury. We need
to equip the FCO not just to meet the challenges of
today, but to rise to the unknown challenges of tomorrow.
There must be a renewed focus on aid and diplomacy in
all that it does.

A recent Foreign Affairs Committee report, “The
FCO and the 2015 Spending Review, stated:

“In an increasingly unstable world, the Government relies on
the FCO to have the necessary infrastructure in place so that it
can make critical decisions at a moment’s notice. Over the last
Parliament the country was found to be lacking in expertise,
analytical capability and language skills to manage the fallout
from the Arab Spring and the crisis in Ukraine. In 2010 it might
have been thought that expertise on Benghazi, Donetsk, or Raqqa
was surplus to requirement. These have become vital areas for our
national security, evidencing the real dangers of an under-funded
Foreign and Commonwealth Office”.

Mr Baron: The hon. Lady is making some excellent
points, and I would love to remain in the Chamber to
listen to the rest of her speech. I promise that I will
pursue it in Hansard afterwards. However, my Whips
have very thoughtfully put me on to a Statutory Instrument
Committee, so would she forgive me if I left her at this
point?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I thank the hon. Gentleman for
what he has said. On this occasion, I shall forgive him.

The FCO must have the capacity to be able to extend
further than the issues with which it currently deals
day to day. In a speech to the Institute for Government
last year, the outgoing permanent under-secretary at
the FCO, Sir Simon Fraser, supported the protection of
UK aid spending and the 2% commitment to defence
spending, but lamented the fact that the FCO’s relatively
small budget would be unprotected in the coming spending
review. He described the FCO as

“the glue that holds everything together”.

He said that the FCO’s budget arguably deserved protection
similar to that given to the larger budgets of the Department
for International Development and the Ministry of
Defence, whose operations overseas would only stand
to benefit from a strong FCO. That being said, the FCO
clearly needs to reform its overseas network to stem
spiralising costs, particularly in the current climate, when
cuts are hitting so many people so hard. At such times,
the focus must be on efficiency and efficacy.

I hope that, when the Minister winds up the debate,
he will be kind enough to answer the following questions. What changes will be made to the implementation of
Government policy outside the United Kingdom when
it spans a range of Departments? Who decides which Department is best placed to co-ordinate joint action between Departments, and how will funding to support that be secured? Will the cuts mean a diminution of the role of the FCO within the Government, and what impact will they have on its continued strategic role in that capacity? Is it not worrying that the United Kingdom’s international role will become further stratified and unbalanced, as Departments such as the MOD and DFID, which have protected budgets, will have a stronger role without the balancing mechanism that the FCO can bring to that work?

Sir Simon Fraser acknowledged that the issue of human rights was no longer a top priority, and it needs to be re-established as such.

Let me now say something about what the FCO looks like to the outside world. In the same speech, Sir Simon conceded that, in the past, the FCO’s culture had been “too narrow, too white and too male”.

He argued that that culture had been improved on his watch, but acknowledged that there was still much more to be done to achieve more diversity, in the full sense of the word. Cuts in the Department may threaten progress in the vital area of equality and diversity. There were no women on the shortlist to replace Fraser as permanent under-secretary. He also noted that the FCO had yet to appoint a woman ambassador to its most prestigious posts, such as those in Washington and Paris, although he emphasised that women were now ambassadors in both Beijing and Kabul. He ascribed that to the “pipeline” of diversity in the organisation, pointing out that the FCO had started behind the rest of Whitehall, having been the last Department to abolish its marriage bar, as late as 1973. Fraser anticipated that there would be some competitive female candidates to replace his successor, both from within the FCO and from outside.

On the subject of wider diversity, although 12% of its total workforce is from a minority ethnic background, the FCO leadership at senior levels is almost exclusively white. Fraser said that there had been a cultural switch to understanding that diversity not only mattered but was good for the FCO, leading to better decisions and outcomes. That applies also to the wider workplace, wherever it might be, and indeed to this House itself.

So what impact will these proposed changes to the Department’s budget have on the work of the FCO to address this culture? What schemes and initiatives within the Department will be funded in the next year specifically to address these issues? An isolationist agenda in our international relations has already damaged the UK’s image. At the very least, let us make sure that this is not reflected in this country’s workforce diversity. This should be, and is indeed, our strength.

2.40 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I congratulate the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), and his Committee—albeit perhaps in its previous form—on making a recommendation that the Government have actually listened to. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) that the Chancellor’s announcement on Foreign and Commonwealth Office spending drew a line under the reductions that had taken place over many years. Like many who have spoken in the debate today, I believe that those reductions have damaged Britain’s ability to project soft power.

I have just come from a meeting of the Defence Committee, at which we heard about an organisation called the Conflict Studies Research Centre, which used to be based within Whitehall. It was a Government organisation, but it was cut in a similar way to that described by my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay when he talked about our ability to inform the Executive of what was going on. However, I am delighted to say that it has re-emerged in the private sector. With London continuing to be a major hub for international organisations, think-tanks and other sources of expertise in foreign affairs and defence issues, we need to be smarter and more fleet of foot in using those resources—much as similar resources are used in Washington, perhaps rather better than we use ours.

In my capacity as a Minister and subsequently in roles on Select Committees and on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I have been privileged to see our Foreign Office posts working abroad and I have huge respect for those who work in them. The programme of post closures was reversed under the coalition Government, and that was very welcome, but I believe that what we have in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has become broad and shallow. We need to concentrate on finding depth, and I therefore agree with many of the sentiments that have been expressed today. William Hague’s reopening of the language school is a welcome part of the re-engagement with those important skills.

Through Foreign and Commonwealth Office posts abroad, the UK projects soft power. I often see this in my capacity as a trade envoy. Cuts to the FCO are short-sighted. When we engage with countries and build relationships over long periods of time, that is reflected in jobs at home, in exports and in helping our balance of payments. I have seen our influence wax exceed expenditure because of the hard work being put into relationships being built with Governments, people of influence and countries. I am kicking the dust off my feet following a trip to Jordan and Lebanon last week with the Defence Committee. I should like to put on record my thanks to those two outstanding posts and to the ambassadors, the defence attachés, the political officers and the security staff operating in those countries. The United Kingdom’s stock is high over there, and we are benefiting from trying to keep those two countries stable in the face of unbelievable threats from over the border in Syria and Iraq.

I want to concentrate on what my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay called trouble spots. He perhaps looked back with a degree of Schadenfreude, and in some cases he was justified in expressing that, although in other cases I might question it. In looking at trouble spots, he said that we should look forward and ask where the trouble spots of the future might be. I suggest that a glaring example is a resurgent Russia.

Whitehall had real experts on the Soviet Union throughout the cold war, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate said. When that Soviet Union collapsed, not all of those posts were stripped out as the people retired, were let go or moved to other areas of the Foreign Office or other Departments. At that point, our corporate knowledge...
fell to an alarming degree. I may be straying from the point slightly here, but the Defence Intelligence Service had no Ukraine desk officer at the time of the uprising. It had to borrow one from the South Caucasus desk. I imagine that similar problems existed elsewhere in the Foreign Office as the glaring reality of a major threat to the interests of Britain and NATO suddenly emerged. There is a real need to understand these threats and to examine how we should resource them in the future.

I am not making any excuses for the Soviet Union, but at least in those days there was some kind of group accountability in that country and we did not feel that the regime was simply being run by one individual on his whim. Now, Russia is ruled by one autocratic mega-thief, a kleptocrat of quite staggering proportions who can annex the sovereign territory of another state, who can have people murdered on the streets of London and no doubt elsewhere, and who oversees a regime that murders people such as the lawyer Sergei Magnitsky in prison in Russia. I wonder how many more Litvinenkos and Magnitskys there are. This is a man who can do to parts of Syria what he did to Grozny and who can threaten states that we are treaty-bound to defend under our membership of NATO. This is an individual for whom rules-based governance is anathema. We should therefore govern much of our thinking—and much of the way in which we resource our foreign policy and defence policy—by the use of one clear question: “What would Putin want?”

Tom Brake: And what does the hon. Gentleman think Putin would want in relation to the UK’s membership of the European Union?

Richard Benyon: The right hon. Gentleman must have read the next page of my speech. I shall answer that question precisely in a moment; I think he will agree with what I have to say.

What President Putin would want first is for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office budget to be curtailed. He would also want a weaker NATO that was riven by infighting and that continued to run down its armed forces, as it has done in years gone by. He would also want a NATO that did not respond to an escalation in aggressive actions against states on Russia’s western border. He has had a bit of bad news in that regard, however, because there has been a reversal in the decline in defence spending, not least by Britain but also by some of our allies. This situation requires massive efforts of diplomacy to keep our alliances moving in the right direction, showing resolve and showing the ability to stand up to the actions of his regime.

To answer the question from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), Putin wants a west in which influential countries such as Britain become less influential. I think the right hon. Gentleman can see where I am going here. Putin wants a weakened European Union. Let us remember that it is the EU, not NATO, that can impose damaging sanctions against his regime. He hates having an economic rule-setter on his western border.

As the leader of the UK delegation to NATO, I recently attended a meeting with other delegation leaders at NATO headquarters. Informally and formally, our allies crossed the floor to ask me, with varying degrees of incredulity, whether Britain was really going to leave the EU. I hope that the Foreign Affairs Committee’s report will look not only at the costs of a possible Brexit but at the impact it would have on the geopolitics of our European foreign policy. These people, including Americans, were coming up to me and saying, “Now? At this time? Really? With all that threatens Europe, economically, militarily and societally?” There is much that our diplomats and intelligence services have to do in the coming years: shore up our alliances, particularly NATO; encourage more spending on defence among our allies; and use all methods, through both our hard and soft power postures, to deter Russia. This is about how we invest; how we work with our allies; and how we exercise our armed forces and show strength.

Daniel Kawczynski: When we met Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels last week, he not only concurred with a lot of what my hon. Friend is saying, but discussed the other side of the coin, which is the importance of dialogue with Russia. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to attempt to engage with Russia, despite these tensions, to try to defuse them?

Richard Benyon: I entirely agree with that. I am certainly not somebody who believes in confrontation; my hon. Friend probably knows that well, as he knows how I operate in this House, and exactly the same applies in how we deal with a potential aggressor. The purpose of what I am saying today is that not only should we be strong, showing that our alliance is strong and that we are not going to see the envelope of article 5 pushed by people such as President Putin, but we should engage diplomatically with him and with his regime to try to get some common sense. We should use resources such as the World Service and the British Council, as my hon. Friend is saying, but discussed the other side of the coin, which is the importance of dialogue with Russia. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to attempt to engage with Russia, despite these tensions, to try to defuse them?

Richard Benyon: As always, my hon. Friend makes a very powerful point, and he and his family perhaps understand this more than any of us in this House.

Let me conclude by talking about one concept in foreign policy, which is our will—our will to make a better world and to extol the virtues of the kind of society that we enjoy in this country and that most of our European colleagues also enjoy in the west. We face difficulties in that; we get on with our lives as independent members of different alliances, be it NATO, the EU or other arrangements we have, whereas an aggressor such
as Russia is one country controlled pretty much by one individual, and so our will is tested. On the face of it, we should not be alarmed, because across NATO 3.2 million troops are under arms and the four largest NATO members spend $740 billion a year on defence compared with Russia’s figure of £65.6 billion. But that statistic, stark as it is, does not describe the depth of the problem we are seeing in places such as Ukraine, Georgia and Syria, and the threats, be they actual or subversive, faced by NATO countries such as the Baltic states. We have to have a strong will, and proving that we have it requires resources, commitment and the hard slog of soft power and diplomatic efforts. It requires language skills and a real in-depth understanding. Of course there are other problems in the world, for example, in the South China sea, in Africa and elsewhere, which draw many of those resources away from a particular problem.

As so many people have said in this debate, we do not know what is coming round the corner next, but I am certain about one thing: Russia will tweak NATO’s nose, push the envelope of article 5, be it through cyber, by playing on Russian-speaking nationals in certain countries or just by threatening countries that are friendly to us but not members of NATO, such as Sweden, through incursions into their waters or airspace. Today, in the Defence Committee, we were told that “any weakness on our part, Russia exploits.” Making sure that Russia understands that the west will respond and will punish it if it attacks a NATO state must remain a key foreign policy objective—but it is one that needs proper resourcing.

2.55 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome the opportunity for this debate, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). I agree entirely with what he said about President Putin. Others have made these points today, but let me address President Putin directly: esli vy hotite pogovorit’ c nam, my budem govorit’ vam. I hope he will have heard that message—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I hope that was in order, because I have no idea what the right hon. Gentleman just said. If he would translate it for the benefit of those of us who do not speak Russian, I would be very grateful.

Tom Brake: I am happy to translate it. I simply said that if President Putin wants to talk to us, we will be very happy to talk to him. The hon. Member for Newbury talked about language skills, which is an important matter, as without them it is difficult to engage effectively with others.

It is a pity that the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) is no longer in his place, because if he had he been, I would have disagreed with him on the subject of Syria. What we know about the situation in Syria is that since the UK Parliament decided not to take action some years ago, a quarter of a million people have died, more than 4 million people have become refugees in neighbouring countries and 7 million people or more have become refugees within Syria. Although we cannot know for certain what the impact of limited UK military involvement might have been, we know and can see in concrete terms the consequences of the failure to take any action.

Crispin Blunt: Will the right hon. Gentleman remind the House of what we were being asked to take action for?

Tom Brake: I will come back to that—

Stephen Gethins: I was going to raise a similar point to the one raised by the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, who discussed the Russians. If we were to take action, what would the consequences of Russian action be? Does this not go to the very heart of the debate we are having about the need to fund the Foreign Affairs Committee properly, in order to address military action?

Tom Brake: Indeed. To respond to the earlier point, we were being asked to leave open the opportunity of military action being taken in the future. That is what the debate and the vote were about; it was not a vote about whether we should take military action at that point. It would have left open that opportunity, but because the vote went against leaving open that opportunity, the chance to take military action in Syria was closed down at that point. I agree entirely with the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) that the whole purpose of this debate is to highlight the importance of funding the Foreign and Commonwealth Office adequately.

Crispin Blunt: I think I can help the right hon. Gentleman. We were being invited to take military action in order to deprive President Assad’s regime of its chemical weapons—that was what we were being asked to do. If there was a proposition to do something much wider, that is the one that should have been put to the House.

Tom Brake: My recollection may be slightly different from that of the hon. Gentleman, but if I recall it correctly the vote was about leaving open the option of the UK Parliament taking military action at a point in the future, which would have required another vote. The UK Parliament decided at that point to say that it did not want to leave open the option of that future action, and I regret the fact that that decision was taken.

On the European Union, I hope we will be able to engage in a positive campaign on this matter. This is not entirely related to the estimates, but I wonder whether the Minister for Europe has a view about whether the GO—Grassroots Out—campaign is the one that should be pushed forward as the campaign for Brexit, on the basis that it is a good cross-party campaign and is perhaps best placed to represent the Brexit campaign.

I have a suggestion that will cost the FCO absolutely nothing. Once, hopefully, the EU referendum campaign is over and we have convinced the country that we are better off in, I hope to see the Ministers who have quite recently come out in favour of our membership of the European Union occasionally talking about the benefits
of our being in the EU. The difficulty over the next four months is that many of those Ministers who have now rightly stated that, on balance, we are better off in the European Union, have previously not highlighted some of the positives involved. This suggestion that Ministers should speak more positively about the EU will have no cost to the FCO.

On Syria, it would be helpful to know exactly what is being built in the budget for what we hope will happen after the ceasefire. If the ceasefire holds, and we get to a position in which there is a degree of stabilisation in Syria, there will clearly be a need for the FCO to make quite a substantial financial commitment to greater involvement in the stabilisation process that should then follow. I hope that we have budgeted for that.

Let me turn now to human rights and the importance of having an FCO policy that promotes human rights. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) rightly referred to what the permanent under-secretary had said, which was that human rights “is one of the things we follow, it is not one of our top priorities.” He then went on to say in response to a subsequent question that “right now the prosperity agenda is further up the list”.

I wrote to the permanent under-secretary to get some clarity over what he was saying about human rights and the prosperity agenda. I wanted to know how the two things worked together and whether one had a greater priority than the other. He replied, for which I was very grateful, but he did not comment on his quote, but what he did provide was a useful breakdown of how many people within the FCO, in full-time equivalent terms, work on human rights versus the number of people who work principally on prosperity. The figures are that 240 people work on human rights, against 2,900 people on prosperity. I do not know what is in the estimates from a budgetary point of view, but will the Minister tell us whether there is some sort of forward vision about how that balance might change?

Clearly, there are many, many human rights issues around the world—the Minister will be pleased to know that I will refer to but a few of the things in the thick sheaf I have here—and I want to know the FCO will be fully engaged in that. Let me run through them very quickly. First, on Burma, it is very pleasing that there are developments there, but I know that some of the Burma campaign groups are very worried that, even with the important role that Aung San Suu Kyi is playing, some minority groups are at a greater risk now than they were before. That requires FCO attention.

In Bahrain, we know that the UK Government are working with the prison authorities and the police to improve the regard for human rights, but there are concerns that the policy is not yet delivering the goods. I want to be certain that the FCO is sufficiently resourced to deal with such matters. I could say the same about China as well.

Perhaps the most worrying development—this is where the FCO really does need to invest very heavily—to ensure that it has the right number of people in place—is with regard to Saudi Arabia and Yemen. I am really concerned that, at some point in the near future, it will be confirmed that there have been breaches of international humanitarian law. There are enough organisations that have produced evidence to suggest that that is likely to be the case. The FCO will be in a very difficult position. Although the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has repeatedly said that there have been discussions with the Saudis and that assurances have been given, it seems that the evidence points in the other direction. The FCO needs to monitor very carefully the activities of the Ministry of Defence, which is responsible for assessing whether IHL has been broken. It would be in no one’s interests to find out subsequently that, in fact, IHL had been broken in relation to the activities of the Saudis in Yemen.

I am pleased to hear that, perhaps without great fanfare, the Committees on Arms Export Controls has been re-established. I hope that, at its first inquiry, it will look at the question of UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia, because that is the most pressing problem.

I could also mention human rights issues in Sri Lanka, which remain a priority for the Tamil community. There is also the matter of the human rights of the Ahmadi Muslim community in various countries around the world where they are often put under pressure.

I will finish by saying that the investment that we make in the FCO, whether it is hard investment in terms of our presence around the world or the soft power to which many Members referred, must be a priority for us. It helps us to punch above our weight and to ensure that the UK, whether it is through the British Council or our embassy presences around the world, is a major player on the world stage. I would like to ensure that that continues.

3.7 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), and all his colleagues, including my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), on the important job they have done in producing the report and the quite considerable success that they have achieved in persuading the Chancellor at least to maintain the Foreign Office budget more or less at what it was in the face of very great pressure. I will come back to some of those points as we go on.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) pointed out, this is a debate on the estimates. Madam Deputy Speaker, you were only doing your job when you called my hon. Friend to order, because of the rules and conventions of this House by which you are bound. None the less, it does serve to demonstrate the complete inadequacy of the estimates process. The motion in front of us today authorises, in clauses 2 and 3, the expenditure of more than £50 million of public money, yet the Chamber is almost empty. There has not even been a single contribution from the Back Benches of the Official Opposition party. The broader estimates are contained in the mighty tome, House of Commons paper 747, which was no doubt named after a jumbo jet owing to its not inconsiderable size. Yet here we are, barely an hour and 20 minutes after starting this debate, moving to the wind-up speeches.

All kinds of important Government expenditure will have no kind of real in-depth scrutiny. Page 407 includes a payment from the resources reserves (programme)
budget in respect of the battle of New Orleans commemoration—an increase of £142,000. Page 410 contains a transfer to the Cabinet Office (capital) budget in respect of the Foxhound Project—perhaps the Minister can tell us what that is. There is a decrease of £3 million to that Government budget. Also on page 410 is a cost-neutral transfer of the old Admiralty building, which is much appreciated by FCO officials, I am sure, to the Department for Education.

Crispin Blunt: I have some sympathy with the hon. Gentleman and with the arguments, which were almost in order, about the quality of the estimates. As he has raised this question, perhaps when the Minister replies to the debate he can explain why we have given that money to celebrate a British defeat that happened after the peace treaty was concluded on the war in which it took place. Perhaps we can also have an explanation of the biggest number of all in the Foreign Office estimates, which is the budget-neutral increase in programming expenditure fully offset by an increase in receipts in respect of revised intergovernmental charging, which appears to be a sum of £220 million. If the Minister could explain that, we might at least have had some focus on the estimates themselves.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman makes my point for me. It demonstrates the complete lack of scrutiny. Madam Deputy Speaker, you did, of course, say that there are other mechanisms—such as Select Committees, statements, Question Times and Westminster Hall—through which we can discuss different aspects of expenditure. The estimates process itself is clearly inadequate, particularly for those Members from Scotland who were told during the debates on English votes for English laws that this was the opportunity for us to discuss Barnett consequentials and the impact of legislation on which we cannot vote because of the EVEL procedures. It seems that that opportunity is being denied to us. As a member of the Procedure Committee, I look forward to our inquiry into the estimates procedure and to questioning Ministers, particularly Treasury Ministers, and Members from all parties about how we can make this procedure fair. As I am at risk of deviating too far from the motion and the argument, which were almost in order, about the quality of the estimates. As he has raised this question, perhaps when the Minister replies to the debate he can explain why we have given that money to celebrate a British defeat that happened after the peace treaty was concluded on the war in which it took place. Perhaps we can also have an explanation of the biggest number of all in the Foreign Office estimates, which is the budget-neutral increase in programming expenditure fully offset by an increase in receipts in respect of revised intergovernmental charging, which appears to be a sum of £220 million. If the Minister could explain that, we might at least have had some focus on the estimates themselves.

It seems from the tone of the debate that the FCO is in a somewhat precarious situation. It is a victim, like so many other Departments, people and communities across the country, of the Government’s ideological commitment to swinging public service cuts, no matter what the cost. In the SNP manifesto, we showed that it was possible modestly to increase public services, while over the long term still balancing the books and paying down the public debt. This estimate is one of the more unforeseen and probably slightly less concerning aspects of that commitment, as it does not impinge on people’s day-to-day lives in the way that so many other cuts are. Nevertheless, it is the impact of an ideological drive from the Government.

At the same time, that approach is leading to an increasingly ideological and almost isolationist narrowing of focus and interest, with a divergence away from what should be priority areas—the protection of human rights and the promotion of peaceful and sustainable development. Some of that was alluded to in the discussion about the role of the FCO and its expenditure on overseas and official development assistance. The SNP has long welcomed the Government’s commitment to 0.7% of GNI to be spent on ODA, but meeting the target is not a blank cheque to spend that on whatever the Government can cram into the definition of ODA. I have several times raised on the Floor of the House the increasing overlap between expenditure for that target and that for the 2% NATO target, which might be allowed in principle but I do not think is what people expected in practice when the Government made those commitments.

The hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) mentioned ODA and the funding of the World Service, and I share a number of his concerns. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Shiekh) talked about the importance of effective collaboration across Government, and it would be interesting to hear the Minister’s responses to her points.

The headline FCO budget is one of the smallest in government, but that does not mean that it is necessarily the most effective or efficient. The discussion, as I have said, is in the context of the pressure being felt across public spending, so if the FCO’s budget is to be protected it must be used efficiently. From the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) we heard some statistics about the number of people employed. Over my lifetime I have, for various reasons, visited three of Her Majesty’s embassies and high commissions around the world. I was in Malawi, where, despite 2 million people in that country not having access to clean water, the high commissioner has a swimming pool at his disposal in his residence. In Zambia, a tennis court is provided in a country in which most children probably play football without shoes. Just the week before last I was in Berlin, where I found that the embassy takes up an entire street block and practically stops the traffic through one of the main thoroughfares right next door to it.

There are undoubtedly efficiencies to be found. We were told during the independence referendum that Scotland could never afford a network of global embassies, outposts and so on—that this would be one of the crippling costs of independence. To be fair, if we were to try to replicate what the FCO has, that might well be true. However, I think that a country such as Scotland could probably manage much more modestly. Indeed, considering the role that we play in the world today, so could the United States—I mean the United Kingdom, although the United States probably could too, for that matter.

Other issues that the FCO needs to consider have been mentioned in other debates. There was a useful debate in Westminster Hall a while back about consular assistance, especially for bereaved families following the loss of loved ones overseas. I wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), about concerns that one of my constituents raised about support for people who are victims of terrorist attacks—or, more accurately in her case, who witness terrorist attacks, as she did in Tunisia. She feels very concerned about the lack of information and communication, which I have mentioned in parliamentary questions and in a letter to the Under-Secretary.
Finally, we have also heard about the downgrading of human rights in the FCO’s priority areas. The director of Amnesty International has said:

“The UK is setting a dangerous precedent to the world on human rights. There’s no doubt that the downgrading of human rights by this government is a gift to dictators the world over and fatally undermines our ability to call on other countries to uphold rights and laws.”

This is a serious concern about which I have heard from a number of civil society organisations, and it is important that it is addressed. Nowhere else is that more true than with the situation in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, where UK planes with pilots trained in the UK and bombs made in the UK, co-ordinated in the presence of UK military advisers, are being used in the war in Yemen. At some point, the Government must tell us when that adds up to complicity in that war.

In conclusion, these next two days ought to be taken up by a debate on the estimates process, but we have shown in this debate the inadequacy of the House’s processes and procedures for dealing with estimates and expenditure. We have also touched on the important role of the FCO; the pressures it faces as a result of the Government’s ideological budget cuts and the challenges that present for more effective use of taxpayers’ money and co-ordination across Departments.

3.17 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this important debate. With an international network of 268 posts across 168 states, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has a long and proud history as a world leader in diplomacy, securing peace, protecting citizens abroad and providing an overseas platform to many domestic Departments and agencies.

Last year, the UK was ranked No. 1 in the world in Portland’s league table of soft power. As the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who is no longer in his place, mentioned, the concept of the battle of ideas is incredibly important as we approach the coming elections. We have heard about the downgrading of its focus on human rights. The Committee’s report, which we have debated at length, shows that over the last Parliament the country was found to be lacking in expertise, analytic capability and language skills to manage the fallout from the Arab spring and the crisis in Ukraine. We heard some very interesting Russian from the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) emphasised the importance of acquiring language skills. One never knows when one might need a language.

I hope the House will receive from the Minister today a clear outline of spending estimates which will demonstrate how he intends to repair the damage already inflicted on his Department, to allow the UK to pursue its political and diplomatic objectives and maintain the global lead in soft power resources.

Last summer the world observed the largest refugee crisis since the second world war. According to figures released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are an estimated 59.9 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, more than 20 million of whom are externally displaced refugees. As has been discussed in the House recently, since the summer, millions of those refugees are fleeing the destabilising civil war in Syria. Earlier today, following the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Jo Cox), the House was fully engaged in a debate about how the situation in Syria could improve. We must have the resources to match the energy and the desire in this House to see peace in the middle east.

Given the media coverage, it would be easy to think that that was where the problem ended, but we know that millions of people have fled Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan, Burma, Iraq, Eritrea, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Gaza and the west bank—the crisis is global. I take this desperate situation as a clear example of why we need a Foreign and Commonwealth Office that is properly funded and capable of engaging with these issues. Only a properly funded Foreign Office can allow the UK to take its place at the United Nations Security Council to set an agenda that seeks to address the causes of the international refugee crisis.

It has become clear that as a result of five years of cuts, there has been a change in the FCO’s focus and a downgrading of its focus on human rights. The Committee Report noted:

“The Permanent Under-Secretary acknowledged that human rights was now not one of the top priorities and that ‘in a constrained environment’, other elements of the FCO’s work had ‘supplanted it to an extent’. We believe this to be a consequence of the savings imposed so far on the Department.’

To give one example on which there has been a lot of correspondence between Labour colleagues and others, Mr Andargachew Tsige, a British citizen currently imprisoned in Ethiopia. We could devote much more energy to such cases, were we to have the resources in country.

At one time securing peace, strengthening human rights and protecting our citizens abroad were at the top of the FCO’s list of priorities, yet the recent state visit by China, for example, appears to illustrate the fact that the Foreign Secretary’s top priority for the FCO is mainly commercial. It was up to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition to raise specifically the problem of the tariff arrangements which put UK steel at a trade disadvantage with China, human rights in China, climate change and the need to tackle enduring poverty. In recent months, the priority of international security in relation to the South China sea has come to the fore.

[Patrick Grady]
This Government’s foreign policy lacks balance. Trade with China or any other nation is only one side of the coin. The other side of the coin, human rights, appears to have declined in importance. The Foreign Secretary has committed to an “internal review” following the Foreign Affairs Committee report. We look forward to seeing that, yet this House is still waiting to be told if it will be made public. Ministers should explain why they will not commit now to publishing this important document, given the clear public and national interest.

In conclusion, the FCO website states that its priorities are to protect British people and promote our global influence and prosperity. After five years of cuts, the question is whether the FCO remains fit to deliver those priorities. There is strong evidence, much of which we have heard in the House today, that diplomatic operations have been devalued and the FCO’s workforce has been cut right back. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments on projected estimates, and I hope to hear more about how an adequately resourced Foreign and Commonwealth Office might lead to a more rounded foreign policy.

3.24 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and the members of the Foreign Affairs Committee for bringing their report to the debate this afternoon.

From both sides of the House, there was a common theme: the importance of an effective diplomatic service and Foreign Office in advancing and defending the interests of the United Kingdom in the face of multiple challenges in different parts of the world. I thank in particular those hon. Members who paid tribute to the work of individual members of Her Majesty’s diplomatic service. That gives me the opportunity not only to thank those individuals myself, but to put on the record my own thanks and those of the ministerial team for the professionalism and commitment that members of the diplomatic service have shown to us, as they have to previous Governments. They continue to work day in, day out on behalf of the people of this country.

I want to move on to the spending review and the settlement for the FCO, but I cannot quite let the remarks of the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) go without comment. I completely understand that it is the job of an Opposition spokesman to try to find criticisms to make of the Government—I remember doing that myself some years back—but the degree of amnesia that infected her judgment on this occasion was astounding. It was as if the years from 1997 to 2010 had been airbrushed out of the historical record.

It is worth reminding the House that under the Governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the Foreign Office’s budget was cut, posts were closed, the language school was axed altogether, the library was scrapped, and we got to the craziest situation of all. After the Treasury had removed the traditional protection arrangement that it had offered against the Foreign Office’s exposure to foreign exchange movements, as a result of the payment of salaries and bills by overseas posts, the former colleague, Mr. David Miliband, was reduced to having to draft in members of the diplomatic service to establish a hedge fund unit inside the Foreign Office so that the Foreign Office could try and run a hedging operation of its own. I do not want to hear too many lectures from the Labour party about Foreign Office expenditure and sensible budgeting.

The Foreign Affairs Committee and the House as a whole are entitled to ensure that the Government are held properly to account for delivery of their responsibilities in the field of foreign and security affairs. My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate and, I think, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) asked about two or three specific items in the estimates. I am going to have to write to them about two of those, but I can give them some satisfaction on the question of the battle of New Orleans, because I have been passed some additional advice. The purpose of the occasion was to commemorate the British dead in that battle and celebrate the 200 years of peace that have followed between the United Kingdom and the United States. The Foreign Office has contributed $215,000; other contributors have included the state of Louisiana and Boeing, and there has also been a significant personal contribution from our honorary consul in New Orleans.

Crispin Blunt: While my right hon. Friend is on that issue, can we see how adroit he and his team are? Will he explain what the Foxhound Project is? Is this a welcome addition to the leisure activities of Her Majesty’s Government, or is it expenditure in respect of something else?

Mr Lidington: If my hon. Friend is expecting to reopen the debate on field sports, I will definitely disappoint him. That is one of the subjects on which I will write to him and the hon. Member for Glasgow North.

The Foreign Affairs Committee report, published on 20 October last year, came before the publication of the spending review, the national security strategy and the new development strategy in November last year. The report was important, because it contributed to an extremely vigorous public debate about the importance of continuing to invest in our diplomatic resources.

As a number of hon. Members noted, the Chancellor responded in his spending review. He noted in his statement in this place the crucial role of what he described as “our outstanding diplomatic service”, and he announced that the Government would protect the budget of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in real terms. That is important because, as right hon. and hon. Members across the House have said, an effective and expert diplomatic service is an important element in allowing this country to respond to the international challenges that we face to our interests.

Now, there is no avoiding the fact that, despite that commitment to protect the FCO’s budget in real terms, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will still have difficult decisions to take about relative priorities in the Department, but that is no more than the challenge that would confront any Secretary of State. We would all like to feel that the budgets available to us were unlimited; in the real world, however, those budgets are finite, and they are constrained by the Government’s overall need to bring down the deficit and address this country’s long history of living beyond its means in terms of the public finances.

The Future FCO review, about which my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate asked me, is designed in part to find ways in which we can secure our objectives as a
Department by doing things differently. I have talked briefly to the reviewer, who is also speaking to other Ministers and senior officials, and the purpose of the review is to advise Ministers and senior officials on how the FCO can be more expert, more agile and more focused on its key priorities than it is at the moment.

I expect the review to be in a position to set out its conclusions later this year—by the end of the spring, I hope. We intend there to be a clear vision of how the FCO should look by 2020, so that we can implement changes in the Department to enable us, within the priorities and resources we have, to secure our objectives more effectively and more efficiently than in the past. We also hope that the review will ensure that, where efficiencies can be made, the savings can be channelled straight back into serving the core objectives that the Foreign Secretary has set.

My hon. Friend asked about the spending review letter. The Government’s policy in respect of all Departments is not to publish settlement letters. There is plenty of public information in the spending review documentation and the Chancellor’s speech and answers. The letters are part of ongoing policy discussions, so it is not appropriate that they should be in the public domain at this time.

The overall resource departmental expenditure limit for the FCO will rise in line with inflation in each of the four years covered by the spending review, increasing our funding from £1.1 billion in 2015-16 to £1.24 billion by 2019-20. We believe that this settlement will enable the Department to maintain our world-class diplomatic service, including our network of posts around the world, which host not only the FCO but 32 other Government Departments and agencies. That global presence and continued foreign policy leadership in Whitehall by the FCO will serve to protect our national presence and continued foreign policy leadership in the world, which host not only the FCO but 32 other Government Departments and agencies. That global presence and continued foreign policy leadership in Whitehall by the FCO will serve to protect our national security, promote our prosperity and project the UK’s values overseas.

In line with the Government’s commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on development assistance, the FCO will be allocated additional ODA-eligible resources, more than doubling our spending from £273 million to £560 million in 2019-20. That will enable us to pursue our key foreign policies and to deliver the ambitions set out in the national security strategy and the development strategy.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) asked, very reasonably, how we reconcile the priorities of different Departments and ensure that, as far as possible, they incorporated within an overall agreed Government approach. The answer, in part, is that there are frequent conversations between Ministers in the different Departments dealing with external affairs and between their officials. However, in the broadest sense, the strategic direction on the key elements of the United Kingdom’s external policy is set after discussion by the National Security Council, chaired by the Prime Minister. The NSC brings together the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor, the International Development Secretary, the Defence Secretary and other interested Ministers precisely so that we can agree on an approach that harnesses the different skills of all Government Departments and, at the same time, establishes which Departments are to contribute which resources to that common objective.

The settlements include increased spending to support the UK’s overseas territories. In order to meet our long-standing commitment to address their reasonable needs, the FCO will co-ordinate a new strategy for the overseas territories and chair a new director-level board to co-ordinate cross-Government activity. Furthermore, as announced by the Prime Minister during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Malta in November last year, the United Kingdom will host the next such Heads of Government gathering in 2018, and the FCO will co-ordinate that event.

The spending review settlement provides the same budget for Chevening scholarships as in 2015-16 of £46 million per year. Over its 32-year history, that scholarship scheme has built up a large and influential alumni network aligned with the interests of the United Kingdom, and this funding will ensure that that continues.

A number of hon. Members asked about language training and language skills. The FCO language centre was reopened in September 2013 to renew the focus on and investment in languages as a core diplomatic skill, and ensure that we get the right people with the right skills in the right jobs to deliver our objectives. As a priority, we will allocate new funds to improve Mandarin, Russian and Arabic language skills. In 2015, we trained 34 staff in Arabic, 14 in Mandarin and 24 in Russian, as well as 35 in French and 28 in Spanish. I completely accept that more needs to be done, but we are making progress, and there is a very clear commitment to continuing to develop language skills.

In addition, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will spend up to £24 million over the next four years to increase the presence of its counter-terrorism and extremism experts overseas. In sum, our budget will allow us to focus on our key foreign policy objectives, including tackling Daesh and ensuring security in Europe. It will also allow us to do even more to prevent conflict and encourage stability in fragile states. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made it clear that the Department will need to become leaner and build on its core strengths, and reinvest and refocus resources on new priorities. That is the reason for the review, about which I have already spoken, and it is also what lies behind the creation of a new digital transformation unit, the purpose of which is to ensure that FCO officials have access to the latest techniques for using modern technology in their work. After a year in operation, the diplomatic academy is already boosting both broader policy capability and specialist skills.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) asked about the tech overhaul programme. We are planning for its global deployment from 2016 to 2018, and a headline figure of £105 million has been agreed by the FCO board. We believe that the overhaul will provide greater speed, stability and reliability, and, partly by reducing the time currently lost because of inadequate IT systems, increase the productivity of all staff members. We are using our IT partner, BAE Systems, to help deliver the tech overhaul to industry best practice standards.

A number of hon. Members asked about human rights. We have taken action to mainstream human rights across the FCO network. The issue remains a priority, but we believe that, rather than it being ring-fenced for a few specialist staff, it should be the responsibility of all British diplomats. More detail of our approach...
has been provided in our written evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee’s human rights inquiry, to which my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Anelay gave evidence on 24 February.

**Tom Brake:** The Minister has mentioned mainstreaming the issue in the FCO, but, as I said earlier, there are 240 people working on human rights, versus 2,900 people working on prosperity. Does he expect that ratio to change significantly?

**Mr Lidington:** The difficulty with providing numbers is that we are talking about not only people who will be in post, but people in desk offices in London who will spend part of their time on human rights and other parts of it on prosperity and advancing British economic interest. I do not think there is a contradiction between the two. When I talk to British businesses about possible investment markets, they frequently tell me that when they assess investment opportunities in a particular country, one of the criteria they use is how good the rule of law is in that country. From a business point of view, they do not want to take the risk of putting money into a place and then finding that, because of corruption, their money, licence or permit is revoked at the behest of some political leader. This is not guaranteed, but a country with an effective rule of law of the kind that will attract inward investment is more likely to have genuinely independent courts and to respect the rights of individuals, so I think that the two go together.

In addition to its resource allocation, the FCO will be provided with a flat cash settlement of £98 million of capital funding per year, to invest in our estate. That will provide further investment across the estate, to maintain our global network and to keep diplomats and other Government staff safe while they work for the UK abroad. Additional capital requirements will be funded from asset sales and the recycling of receipts and, where necessary, through recourse to the reserve.

I have been asked about cross-Whitehall funds. I can confirm that the Government’s spending on international priorities will increase further, with a larger conflict, stability and security fund, a new prosperity fund and more funding for both the British Council and the BBC World Service. The CSSF, through which the FCO funds much of its conflict prevention work, will grow by 19% in real terms by 2019-20 to a total of £1.5 billion a year. That will strengthen our ability to support stabilisation in countries such as Syria, Ukraine, Somalia and Afghanistan, and it will strengthen our response to serious transnational threats, including extremism, serious and organised crime, and illegal migration.

In the conflict, security and stabilisation fund allocations for 2015-16, £400 million were allocated to countries eligible for official development assistance and £633 million to non-ODA countries. The new prosperity fund will be worth £1.3 billion over the next five years, and it will be used to support global growth, trade and stability. That will help us to reduce poverty in emerging and developing countries, and it will open up new markets and opportunities to the United Kingdom. Our diplomatic network helps to facilitate deals for trade and inward investment, to tackle barriers to our own businesses, and to promote open economies and a rules-based international system, which will benefit British business now and in the future.

Funding for the British Council will be protected in real terms, but there will need to be a shift in the balance between ODA and non-ODA funding to support an expansion of the council’s work in developing countries. In addition, the British Council will be able to bid for up to £700 million in additional funding to improve links with emerging economies, help to tackle extremism globally and support good governance.

I was asked about the Department’s human rights work through the Magna Carta fund, and about the balance between ODA and non-ODA countries. The Magna Carta fund has 47 priority countries, the overwhelming majority of which are ODA countries—developing countries. There are four non-ODA countries: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Russia and Israel. Those four, as well as being eligible for support from the Magna Carta fund, are eligible for funding streams such as the Arab partnership fund and the CSSF.

I think there has been agreement across the House that a strong diplomatic service and worldwide network are essential for this country to maintain its position in the world. I believe that the Government’s commitment to protect the Foreign and Commonwealth Office budget and provide additional funds for cross-government international activity will ensure that we are able to play a pivotal role, both bilaterally and through the membership of the many international and multilateral organisations of which we are part, in tackling the most important global challenges.

Without wanting to stray too far from the subject matter, I will simply say that I agreed completely with the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) about how we can amplify the United Kingdom’s diplomatic reach through our active membership of the European Union. I am therefore confident that the outcome of the spending review is good not only for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and British diplomacy, but, most importantly of all, for the interests of the people of the United Kingdom.

3.47 pm

**Crispin Blunt:** With the leave of the House, I will briefly thank hon. and right hon. Members for taking part in this estimates debate on the Foreign Affairs Committee report. I agreed somewhat with the point made during the debate that our ability, as an institution, to oversee the estimates properly is historically woeful and needs to be addressed.

I am grateful for the support that I received for my arguments from my hon. Friends the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) made a point about diversity, which the Minister addressed. That point has power, because clearly we will be better off if our service properly reflects the country in which we live. The organisation was found in 1997 not to reflect that diversity; as it moves away from that position, one wants to be careful about getting there in too much of a hurry, because we might lose some of the talent and ability already in the institution.

There is an issue about how the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has made that change, and that goes across the piece to its budget. In his response, my right hon. Friend the Minister said that it would not be
appropriate at this time to place in the public domain the public expenditure settlement letters. Someone of his experience will recognise a piece of “Yes Minister” speak at the Dispatch Box as well as anyone else. He is, of course, inviting a blizzard of further inquiries if we do not get that detail.

I welcome the Minister’s acceptance of the fact that there is a real need for more progress in language skills. The concern is that he said the Department must become leaner. It is already starving and cannot allocate its resources effectively. What he said about the conflict, stability and security fund being 60:40 in favour of non-ODA countries illustrates the challenges that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office faces. The Committee will continue to examine those challenges during this Parliament.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).
In a letter to me from the permanent secretary, Mark Sedwill has since stated that this error occurred because officials got confused with similar filenames and therefore used the wrong set of data. When the error was discovered, the director general of the crime and policing group at the Home Office, Mary Calam, admitted that she did not understand the significance of the response that she had signed. I am not sure whether that admission was to give us faith in the system or make us question it further. Overnight, police forces across the country had swung from being winners to losers and vice versa.

Chief Constable Giles York of Sussex police said that his force went from a £10 million loss to a £2 million gain. Chief Constable Mike Creedon of Derbyshire police said that his force went from a gain of £20 million to a £7 million loss. Chief Constable Simon Cole demonstrated that Leicestershire constabulary was set to lose £700,000 under the old system, but would now lose £2.4 million.

Subsequently, Mr Speaker granted my urgent question on 19 November 2015 and the process was rightly suspended by the Policing Minister. Again, he should be commended for coming to the Dispatch Box and agreeing that the sums were wrong and that the process had to be halted. I do not want to dwell any further on the history, except to say, as it says in the report, that this was a shambolic end to a poorly managed process that significantly damaged the relationship between the Home Office and its primary stakeholders, the police.

Currently, police funding is supposedly being given on the basis of a funding formula that has not been operated for a number of years. The formula is over a decade old and is not based on the latest census data, but on the previous census. It is impossible for police forces to calculate it because many of the data are out of date and it does not take into account the modern nature of policing.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Having acted as the rapporteur for a report on the police funding formula by the Public Accounts Committee, may I ask the right hon. Gentleman whether he agrees that one issue is that the formula only really reflects the demands that crime places on the police, and not many of the other issues that they have to deal with? Does he share my disappointment that the shadow Policing Minister is not here to listen to this debate?

Keith Vaz: I make no comment on the absence of the shadow Policing Minister. I am sure that he will come in very soon and make up for lost time. I will come to the hon. Gentleman’s first point in my speech. He raises an important issue on the capabilities of the police and the new demands of 21st-century policing.

Mike Creedon, the Derbyshire police chief, said to me that if the current formula was still valid, “it would be reflecting a reality which is ten years old”.

He is clear, as are many other chief constables, that there is a consensus that we need to restart the process of moving to a fairer funding model. I think that this consensus is reflected throughout the House.

Since the publication of the police grant report in December 2015, concerns have been raised that it represents a real-term cut to grant levels of 1.4% and requires increases to the police element of the council tax precept. Police forces are being required to raise the police precept across the country, including in Cheshire, Northumbria, Humberside and Thames Valley—the area that is partly represented by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary. Dee Collins of West Yorkshire police estimates that her force has received a 3.2% cut in real terms, even after the PCC agreed to the maximum precept increase.

The Select Committee published its report on 11 December. The Government’s response is now 19 days late. The first question for the Minister is when the response will come.

Last Tuesday, five police and crime commissioners gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee: Ron Ball from Warwickshire, Alan Charles from Derbyshire, Sir Clive Loader from Leicestershire, Katy Bourne from Sussex and Jane Kennedy from Merseyside. It was clear from their evidence that the police and crime commissioners had not been consulted on the new review. Ian Hopkins, the chief constable of Greater Manchester, has said that he wishes to work collectively and collaboratively with the Home Office, as do many PCCs and chiefs.

It is clear from the concerns that have been raised with me by chief constables before this debate that they have not been consulted. However, in the last debate, which as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, was only last Wednesday, the Minister alluded to the fact that he had met a number of chief constables. I assure that he will enlighten us as to his further discussions when he responds to this debate. Chief Constable Neil Rhodes and Deputy Chief Constable Heather Rouch of Lincolnshire police have informed me that they met the Policing Minister last Wednesday, 24 February, to discuss the formula. I hope that he will tell us the outcome of that meeting.

When he replies to the debate, will the Minister tell us about his engagement with police forces, and reassure them that he is taking the matter as seriously as he was when he last appeared before the House? One issue that must be clarified is the capability review undertaken by the National Police Chiefs Council under the leadership of Sara Thornton. If the Minister could advise the House about how far those deliberations have reached, that will assist us in knowing something of the timetable that he has in mind.

It is concerning that since last year’s formula changes were abandoned, there have been no further proposals to work on. The Minister wrote to me on 1 February with an update on the formula arrangements, but as I said, he has not given us a date for when that review will commence. Police forces need to know what is going to happen. Ian Drysdale, the director of business services for Kent police, said that the continuing uncertainty is unhelpful, and that a transition to a new arrangement should be made as soon as possible. Following the glaring errors last year, it is self-evident that the Home Office should redouble its efforts to create a fairer funding model, and it is clear that the funding review should be restarted as swiftly as possible.

You will be interested to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that Stephen Kavanagh, chief constable of Essex police, has stated that any prevarication on the part of the Home Office would be hugely disappointing and regrettable. Many have argued that it would be wrong to change the formula in a period of austerity, but on the contrary, austerity could have been a starting point for an informed reassessment of the formula in order to incentivise the police for reforms and deal with other inefficiencies. The flat rate reduction for all forces
continues to penalise those who have already received less. However, following the Chancellor’s announcement in the comprehensive spending review on 25 November, which the Committee welcomed, that is less of a concern. In fact, the Home Office has a renewed opportunity to review the formula.

The three key failings aside from the stand-out mistake of confusing data filenames, were essentially process failures, such as sharing exemplifications at an early stage, which meant that data errors went unnoticed until it was too late, setting out transitional arrangements at an early stage, which meant that losers were even more concerned about the potentially immediate damaging impacts on their budget, and not allowing sufficient period for consultation, particularly with PCCs and chief constables. Does the Minister accept that those serious failings should be addressed in a future review process?

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): The Minister accepted accountability for the mistake, but as he will know from his experience on the rugby field, he was sold a hospital pass in having to defend his position. A mistake was made at senior level in relation to the management of the process. We need real reassurance that that will not happen again, and there must be accountability in the management of the Home Office, to ensure that such a catastrophic error, which was not picked up and communicated properly to Ministers, does not happen again.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is right, and he made that point when we took evidence from various chief constables and police and crime commissioners. It is vital to have proper accountability during this process, and I will come on to what the Committee agreed should be the best way forward.

The Home Affairs Committee made a number of recommendations on factors that must be included in the new funding review. We must recognise that although policing has changed fundamentally over the past 10 years, the formula review was being suspended, he was not then the Minister with responsibility for the fire services. The Government must say what they want to fund. Of course, the situation in Wales requires special attention.

The indicators proposed by the Home Office in determining funding—there are only four—fail to take into account many of the points raised in the report, and thus miss 70% to 80% of police demand that is not linked to volume crime. The Home Office needs to make absolutely clear what tasks 21st-century policing is expected to take on, and then decide how much it is prepared to fund.

It is of course important that police forces work in a collaborative way. Indeed, the Government are working in a collaborative way. When the Minister came before the House in November to tell us that the police funding formula review was being suspended, he was not then the Minister with responsibility for the fire services. The Government have decided to look across the Government and ensure that they collaborate properly. If they can do so, so can local police forces. If that happens, it must be part of the funding review formula.

One key Committee recommendation was the appointment of an independent panel to assist the Home Office in formulating the revised proposals. That is not because we do not trust Home Office officials to add up. We need a robust and defensible way of looking at the formula and it needs to be independent. Therefore, the Committee went to the trouble of suggesting the kinds of organisations that should sit on the panel: the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, the College of Policing, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Royal Statistical Society. You will notice, Madam Deputy Speaker, an emphasis on those who can add and therefore crunch statistics. There is an ongoing project between the London School of Economics and Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary to provide a sound academic basis for identifying the underlying demands on police time. Let us use the expertise of our academic institutions. Such work, when led by the independent panel, could make the Minister’s job even easier.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Keith Vaz: This is the last time I will give way because I know that other Members want to speak.

Mr Thomas: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. When he and his fellow Committee members were looking at the potential balance of an independent panel, did they consider experts on serious and organised crime? It will be important to understand the impact on London’s police force of the pressures the Met is under to help to continue the battle against serious and organised crime.
Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is right, and not just from the point of view of what happens in Harrow, which is very different from what happens in Wandsworth, for example. The issue of serious and organised crime has grown in the past 10 years. He is right that that needs to be properly represented as part of the review.

At this time, the Home Office has two realistic options for moving forward: it can spend the next two years on a very long consultative detailed review, run accurate data against the formula, and implement the formula changes it proposed last year after a further period of consultation; or it can go out to an independent method of checking on what is in the best interests of local police forces. Of course, there will always be winners and losers from this process, and there will be police constables and police and crime commissioners with different voices, but to leave the situation in limbo, as it is at the moment, is, in the view of the Committee, unacceptable. Doing nothing is not really an option and this is not an issue that can be parked until, say, 2019. Unfortunately, those are some of the rumours emerging in the press, whether from the Foreign Office or elsewhere.

This time, I hope the Minister will have all the information before we proceed. I hope he will have to hand the capable report that is being prepared by the police chiefs. Their involvement is absolutely critical. I would not like the review to start and then have to stop because there has to be another review, but we do want the process to start as soon as possible. From our point of view, the sooner the better. We want to ensure that everybody in the policing family is properly consulted, so we have no repetition of what has happened in the past.

4.11 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate and a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who always speaks in a calm and reasoned way. I agree with much of what he said.

I am most grateful to Dorset police, the police force that serves me and my constituents. I would like to put on record, as I always do, my thanks, gratitude and admiration for the men and women who patrol the streets day and night. They keep us safe in our homes and safe on those streets. Our police officers have to attend some appalling incidents, often with little protection—they are not armed. And dare I pay tribute to the female officers, who are not the same size as their gentlemen colleagues? They go in fearlessly to look after us, without any thought for their own safety. I pay tribute to all the police officers in the country, and of course in particular to those in Dorset.

I am most grateful to Dorset’s police and crime commissioner, Martyn Underhill—the Minister knows him well through working and corresponding with him; I believe they have a very good relationship, which is excellent news for Dorset police—who has kindly furnished me with most of the facts I am about to divulge. As the Minister knows, Dorset has languished at the bottom of the police funding table for many years, heavily disadvantaged by the current police allocation formula that evolved in turn from the old, standard spending assessment. In last year’s discussions, the Minister described the current formula as “complex, opaque and out of date.”—[Official Report, 21 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 81WS.]

He was absolutely correct, but it remains effectively unchanged. Even with a review in 2009-10, nothing has ever been implemented. Dorset police remains at the bottom of the pile, a situation that cannot and must not be allowed to continue.

The current allocation formula is based on four criteria: a central allocation; a needs-based allocation; a relative resources adjustment; and formula damping, which is nothing to do with children or the changing of nappies. The very wording of the criteria is complicated enough. I hope that in looking at the formula, the Minister will make it considerably more simple.

Unfortunately for Dorset, this model is the worst of all possible worlds. First, our central allocation is historically the lowest in the country. Secondly, our needs-based allocation fails to take into account many of the issues particular to a seaside county, not least tourism on which so much relies. Thirdly, our relative resources adjustment enables us to crawl from bottom to third from bottom when the precept is added in. The current methodology for the RRA, however, is per head of population, whereas council tax from which the precept is raised is levied per household. Let us not forget that the precept is limited to 2% before a local referendum is triggered.

Fourthly, despite the formula being changed in 2010 and its effect never implemented, Dorset believes that it is still losing out to the tune of £1.9 million annually. It has never received that amount—year after year, £1.9 million. The Minister, who I know is listening intently to my speech, will be aware that £1.9 million is a lot of money for the police force in Dorset who are just trying to do their job.

While we welcomed the Chancellor’s commitment in November last year to protect police spending in real terms—that announcement was greeted with relief by police chiefs and police and crime commissioners across the country—further savings still have to be made. Worryingly, when the aggregate grant amounts were finalised by the Minister on 4 February—these assume the maximum precept available—Dorset was 0.6% worse off when compared with the dampened figures for 2015-16. It is also regrettable that after last year’s consultation, a glitch in the data has meant that any permanent change to the funding formula will be delayed for another year. I hope that when the Minister sums up at the end, we will hear more about where we stand on the future formula.

If I may, I shall put Dorset’s case to the Minister. As I have said, it is particularly disadvantaged by the current funding formula on which the funding is based. Tourism is critical to a county such as Dorset, but to date it has been ignored when assessing funding. In common with our strategic partners in Devon and Cornwall, we all find our beautiful surroundings can be a burden as well as a blessing. The current, needs-based element underestimates the pressures that the sheer number of tourists place on policing. The county’s population of 1.1 million rises considerably during the summer months. Visitors stay over 14.5 million nights and day trippers make 26.3 million outings to Dorset every year. This influx is not accounted for and neither is the nature of the county, which is divided into two—the urban part to the east and the rural to the west.

Policing in Dorset rural costs more—in time, resources and even fuel. The formula takes no account of sparsity. Neither does it cater for the high concentration of bars
and clubs in towns like Weymouth and Bournemouth. However, if we look at the number of bars and clubs spread across the county as a whole, the impact on policing so far as the formula is concerned is considerably reduced. I suggest to the Minister that any formula based on a number alone would severely disadvantage our police, so it must continue to include density as well.

The nature of crime, which the right hon. Member for Leicester East touched on, must also be taken into account. Terrorism, cybercrime, people trafficking and sexual abuse, as well as the need to protect the vulnerable, are all more prevalent than they used to be and consume considerable resources, and they apply to rural Dorset just as much as to any other police area.

I shall make four suggestions to the Minister so that any new funding formula can follow these four simple principles. First, it should be stable from year to year, avoiding any fluctuations. Secondly, it should be made up of multi-year settlements to allow certainty in planning. Thirdly, it should be transparent and easy to understand—certainly easier to understand than the current formula. Fourthly, any changes should be phased in to make the transition smoother.

Finally, can we get rid of a hangover from the local authority days, when labour costs were taken into account? Today, given the existing national pay scales across police forces, there should be no difference in labour costs, except where London is concerned. However—in this is a case in point—Dorset currently receives nothing, while Hampshire, across the border, receives an extra 4.6%. That simply cannot be right.

Let me end by saying to the Minister, on behalf of Dorset police, my constituents, and the constituents of other Dorset Members, that any new formula must, please, be more equitable. We are not asking for all the cake; we are just asking for a fair slice of it. Dorset police do an outstanding job, and both they and the residents whom they so ably serve need to know that all relevant factors have been taken into account when a new formula is announced.

I believe that I am the only Conservative speaker in the debate, and that I shall therefore have the great privilege of listening to the speeches of Opposition Members. I shall aim my next remark at the 

Mr Gareth Thomas: 

Speaking as an ex-serviceman, I watched the atrocities in Paris and noted that the police there, who were already armed, were expected to enter the buildings immediately to rescue people. There was no time to hang around. My concern is whether we have sufficient funding and training facilities to ensure that those who find themselves in such a situation here, God forbid, are equipped to enter such buildings immediately. It costs a lot more money to equip and train people to that level of expertise.

Richard Drax: 

Mr Thomas: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We need to ensure that police forces work collaboratively so that there are enough trained individuals.
I gently suggest to him that the Metropolitan police has particular expertise to share in this regard, and that its training facility at Hendon continues to turn out extremely highly trained and effective police officers to work in the Met and elsewhere. He is absolutely right to suggest that the attacks in Paris last year brought into sharp relief the terrorist threat that we all face here in the UK and, I gently suggest, in London in particular.

An ongoing challenge for the Metropolitan police is the fact that crime is rising again. Recorded crime is up 5% in the last 12 months. Violent crime in London is up 22%. The Metropolitan police is operating in the context of 1,600 police officer posts having gone since 2010 and almost 3,000 police and community support officer posts having been axed in the last five years. In my constituency during that period, 137 police officers, sergeants and PCSO positions have been axed. We were used to neighbourhood policing involving a sergeant, three or four police constables and three or four PCSOs. We are now reduced to just one PC if we are lucky, and one PCSO if we are very lucky indeed.

More recently, we have also seen revealed the substantial pressures on the Met, which have led to more and more police officers from the suburbs, particularly Harrow, having to be moved from the borough where they normally do their policing work to police major events or to respond to rising crime in inner London. In the past 12 months, on occasion, 22% of police officer time in Harrow has been abstracted to other boroughs—in other words, 22% of the time Harrow police officers have worked has been spent not policing the streets of Harrow, as it should have been, but policing other streets in London. The Minister may argue that that is an operational issue for the Metropolitan police chief, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, and I would accept that it is, but it is an operational issue being driven by the shortage of resources at his disposal.

Harrow is one of the safest boroughs in London, but we still face significant crime problems, there is still a significant fear of crime, and significant problems with antisocial behaviour remain. My constituents and other constituents in Harrow want to know that our police officers are out policing our streets, instead of policing streets elsewhere in London. What is particularly concerning to my constituents, such that I felt it necessary to intervene in today’s debate, is a proposal to merge Harrow’s police force with those in Barnet and in Brent to create a tri-borough command. The proposal would axe two of the three borough commanders in this area and create just one borough commander for the three areas. Brent has a bigger crime problem than Harrow and its force has the particular challenge of managing events at Wembley stadium. Barnet also faces a very different set of challenges and, again, is an area with slightly higher crime than Harrow. My constituents fear, rightly, that if there is a tri-borough commander, Harrow police will be more easily deployed into Brent or Barnet and away from Harrow.

Given the lack of investment in Harrow police station compared with that in the Wembley and Colindale police stations, my constituents fear that if the tri-borough proposal goes ahead, there will be a question mark over the future of Harrow police station. If the Minister does not feel that he can intervene to reassure my constituents in today’s debate, and I recognise his reluctance to do that, I ask him to have a quiet word with Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe to encourage him to drop this plan for a tri-borough command and reassure my constituents that there will still be one borough commander accountable to us in Harrow for the quality and effectiveness of policing in our borough, instead of our having to share this with those other boroughs. On that point, I welcome the Select Committee’s report and look forward to the Minister’s response.

James Berry: In fact, there is more mental health funding for front-line policing than there has ever been. It is very important that the police work in tandem with clinical commissioning groups to ensure, for example, that there are nurses who can go out on patrol with them to tackle mental health issues, rather than bringing in those people to police cells—often the very worst place for someone suffering from a mental ill health episode. In my neighbouring borough of Richmond, I know that the police are already doing that in conjunction with the CCG.

There was a pause in the review of the funding formula, the financial implications of which were worked out by one police and crime commissioner. I did pause
before signing up to the suggestion in our report that
the likely figures should be revealed before the end of
the consultation. The aim is to arrive at a sound set of
principles, but it is difficult to obtain a balanced response
from people who stand to lose out from an allocation
based on a principle, however sound it might be, because
their elected responsibility as police and crime
commissioners is to maximise the amount of funding
available to them to perform their statutory functions.

The funding formula needs to recognise the diversity
of policing in the UK, which is very difficult when we
are trying to reach a formula at a national level. Our
report references the need for additional funding in
areas where policing of minority communities is a prevalent
issue. In my constituency of Kingston, we have the
largest Korean population in Europe. We have an excellent
Korean liaison officer provided by the police, which
would not be needed elsewhere in the country, and they
provide a vital function in ensuring a link between the
police and the Korean community.

The hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas)
made it clear that there are many other issues in London
that provide a positive case for ensuring that the capital
grant in London is protected and that the special position
of the Metropolitan police is respected. The issue of
diverse communities was raised by the right hon. Member
for Leicester East, and the issue of policing pubs and
bars was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for
South Dorset (Richard Drax). That is plainly volume
policing.

We need more police officers on the streets at kicking-out
times for the pubs and clubs, which are more numerous
in London than anywhere else in the country. The same
applies to the threat of terrorism, which is most significant
in London. I am pleased that the Metropolitan police
have responded to that matter in the light of the Paris
atrocities by significantly increasing the number of armed
response vehicles and armed officers keeping us safe.

The same applies to the various types of crime tackled
centrally on behalf of other police forces, such as online
fraud. We have seen a massive explosion in such fraud
over the past four or five years and although much
more needs to be done and much more funding needs
to be made available to deal with it anything like
comprehensively enough, a large part of it is tackled by
the Metropolitan police's very impressive Operation
FALCON and the City of London police's Action
Fraud. Such crime is perpetrated across the country,
but is largely dealt with by the police in our two capital
police forces. There is a need to protect the special
status of London in any new funding formula.

Where I depart from the comments made by the hon.
Member for Harrow West is where he painted a rather
less than rosy picture of the state of policing in London.
Although there has been a reduction in officer numbers,
a less rigid approach to neighbourhood policing has
allowed a more nimble model that certainly works well
in my borough of Kingston and elsewhere across London.
Of course, crime has dropped dramatically over the
past five years and we have the police to thank for that.
Even if they have lower overall numbers, they have a
significantly larger proportion on the frontline and do
a fantastic job that has resulted in a massive reduction
in crime.

Mr Gareth Thomas: May I encourage the hon.
Gentleman to oppose the merger of borough command
units as well? If they succeed with Harrow, Brent and
Barnet, I would have thought that a Kingston-Sutton
merger might be next. Does he agree with me that that is
a step too far and that the Policing Minister might usefully
intervene with the Metropolitan Police Commissioner
to that effect?

James Berry: I know that locally there will be mixed
feelings if that is proposed in south-west London, but I
do know that the reforms brought in by this Government
and the previous Government mean that these matters
are entirely in the hands of the local police body, which
in the case of London is MOPAC, or the Mayor's Office
for Policing and Crime, rather than the Policing Minister.
They are an operational matter for MOPAC and the
Metropolitan Police Commissioner. I have not seen the
proposals yet, but I would certainly want to be reassured
that there was no less democratic accountability and no
less focus on local policing if that was going to happen
in Kingston. I will wait to see the proposals and I am
sure that all London MPs will have something to say if
and when they are published by the Met police.

The Committee's report records a rather unhappy
period for the Home Office in which the Minister came
to this House and apologised unreservedly, which
was recognised in the report. I am sure that the Minister
is absolutely committed to putting the situation right. The
Government are to be commended for attempting to
create a fair funding formula, which is recognised in the
report, and that is something that previous Governments
have not tried to do.

The terms of the funding formula are yet to be
decided. It is no easy task; I certainly do not envy
the Minister. Indeed, it is such a tricky task that both the
shadow Home Secretary and the shadow Policing Minister
cannot be in the Chamber for this important debate. No
doubt they are scratching their heads and working out
what their alternative funding formula would be. I
welcome the Home Affairs Committee's report and am
pleased to have participated in its production. I am sure
that the Minister will give it his full consideration in
deciding the eventual outcome and I am sure that
although there will be some winners and some losers,
the public will be able to see that the funding formula at
which the Minister arrives is fair to all forces. I hope
that it will protect London, along with the special and
vital functions performed by the Metropolitan and City
of London police to keep us safe.

4.43 pm

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I am
grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important
debate and it is not lost on me that quite a self-selecting
group of MPs has turned out today, all of whom will
probably try to follow a similar formula of saying that
the funding formula does not respond well to the challenges
of their communities. The cumulative nature of the
speeches, however, should not necessarily detract from
the veracity of their argument. Clearly, across this
House, many of us have deep concerns about our
police and about how they are treated under the
current regime. There are winners and losers and, dare
I say it, in the Chamber today there are more losers
than usual.
I am no different from other Members. For me, the acid test of whether a funding formula is truly fair is Bedfordshire. We have lost 171 officers since 2010, and the number of police community support officers has halved from 108 to 53 in that period. In my community in Luton, where we face all sorts of challenges, the effect of those cuts is that neighbourhood policing is practically non-existent. In 2012 we had PCs working alongside PCSOs in Luton. In other words, we had proper neighbourhood policing. That was true of many other parts of the county too.

The old police authority, looking at the scale of cuts coming through, proposed to remove those officers and to cut PCSOs. When the police and crime commissioner was elected in 2012 he put a halt to that process and protected numbers, but, with £20 million of cuts defined, they had to go. The police and crime commissioner in Bedfordshire has said:

“The impact in Luton is no different from the rest of the county. We’ve had no choice other than to strip away preventative, problem-solving neighbourhood policing everywhere to the barest minimum because the alternative is even worse. But current projections mean we need to find £11 million savings and this may mean reducing the establishment by 44% in the next three years.”

The chief constable, Jon Boutcher, estimates that Bedfordshire needs another 300 officers even to reach average numbers, but, with £20 million of cuts defined, they had to go. The police and crime commissioner in Bedfordshire has said:

“The impact in Luton is no different from the rest of the county. We’ve had no choice other than to strip away preventative, problem-solving neighbourhood policing everywhere to the barest minimum because the alternative is even worse. But current projections mean we need to find £11 million savings and this may mean reducing the establishment by 44% in the next three years.”

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman echo the fact that the demand for policing in Luton is not restricted to the people of Luton? It is felt by the rest of the people of Bedfordshire, including in my town, Bedford. Bedfordshire is just not large enough for the rest of the county to chip in for those additional requirements in Luton, as the hon. Gentleman is so clearly outlining. Will he emphasise to the Minister, who I am sure is hearing this, that this is not a partisan view of the funding for Bedfordshire police; this is a cross-party view of the specific needs of Bedfordshire police in the future.

Mr Shuker: I am extremely glad I took the intervention, because the hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, which he has made alongside me and the four other Bedfordshire MPs, both Conservative and Labour, to the Policing Minister, who has kindly given us an audience in the past and, I hope, will do so in the future to make the point that ours is essentially an urban force that is funded as a rural one. The nature of Luton in particular and of Bedford and some of the smaller areas to the north of the county, means that there is a huge disparity in levels of crime, especially the crimes that I mentioned. I will continue to make this point.

This is not a dry argument about formulae. Last week I sat in the house of my constituent Mrs Patel. She is a shop owner. Just before Christmas she was attacked, dragged to the back of her shop and cut by a man wielding a knife. That vicious attack has robbed her of her work and her confidence, and has left deep scars not just mentally but physically. There is only one thing more horrendous than the attack on Mrs Patel in her shop: it is the fact that just a few short years ago, in the same shop and in the same way, her husband was violently attacked and stabbed to death. She wants to know why the officers who used to patrol the area where her shop is and where she lives are not patrolling any more. Her son wants to know why it took so long during this violent attack for a police car to respond. He wants to know why the man who subjected her to such a terrifying attack—who put a knife against her throat and who, it was clear to her, was attempting to send her to the same place as her husband—was not apprehended in the midst of it. The debate is not, therefore, just about a formula: it is about my constituents’ safety and their ability to live their lives without fear of threat.

The argument I advance—that fair funding for Bedfordshire is the acid test for the new police funding formula—is backed up by the context. As I said in response to the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller), Bedfordshire is an urban force funded in a rural way. Luton and, to a lesser extent, Bedford face vastly different challenges from the rest of this rural county. Despite the obvious electoral benefit of moving significant resources into urban areas, it is to the credit of the Labour police and crime commissioner, Olly Martins, that he has, given the challenges, been able to move forward with plans that still provide for a significant rural presence.

As a community, we face all sorts of challenges. We face down extremism daily. The far right—the English Defence League, Britain First and associated groups—regularly target our town. At just one protest last year, a group of about 150 or 200 drunken men led to a policing bill of £320,000, which had to be picked up locally. Of course, there is also the ongoing challenge of infiltration by extremists of the Muslim community.

We also have to defend major transport infrastructure, with London Luton airport, which is in my constituency, carrying upwards of 10 million passengers a year. The east midlands and west coast main lines pass through the constituency, as do the two principal roads between London and the north. Despite all that, Bedfordshire has to get by on similar police funding and, therefore, with similar police strength as Dorset—“we have heard about that already—Sussex and Hertfordshire.

Only one thing that could undermine my argument, so let me pre-empt it: a failure since 2010 to make significant changes, efficiencies and innovations in the way in which Bedfordshire operates. In other words, we could have buried our heads in the sand and said, “The problem is purely the Government cutting spending.” However, that is simply not true.

The force has already made £25 million of savings, and it expects to make another £11 million in the coming three years. Under the leadership of the police and crime commissioner, the tri-force alliance between Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire should produce about £10 million of savings for Bedfordshire alone. A bid is in with the Home Office police innovation fund to support blue-light collaboration with fire and ambulance services. There is increased use of special
constables to support Community Watch, and new technology, including smartphones, slate personal computers, automotive telematics and even drones is being rolled out to save money and police time.

At the same time, we have seen increased transparency—for example, through the use of body-worn cameras—which is vital to maintain the community’s involvement and the sense in which they are protected by the police.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Gentleman talked about the cost savings between Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire. That is about cost sharing, but does he agree that there is still the revenue that accrues to Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire, which is significantly in excess of the financial resources that come into Bedfordshire? It is such a pity that we are not able to encourage those counties to draw together with us. Would he like to hear the Minister’s thoughts on whether there could be Home Office proposals to push forward greater collaboration and greater sharing of revenue as well as costs?

Mr Shuker: Absolutely. There is far greater space for collaboration. Equally, however, there are challenges for a force such as Bedfordshire, and I have not painted a particularly rosy picture of our finances and the challenges we face. There needs to be Government influence over these measures—these things cannot just be left at local level. Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire have had two good police and crime commissioners who have been keen to work with Bedfordshire and have made really decent strides in doing so. Ultimately, however, they are accountable to their own residents for making sure that they get the best deal possible.

I want to signal not only the innovation that has gone on in Bedfordshire but my own willingness to explore innovation on, dare I say it, a statesmanlike basis rather than merely withdrawing into oppositional politics. It is important that through this process we get the funding of Bedfordshire right, first and foremost, and then we can look at further collaboration down the line. The police and crime commissioner in this area has the third cheapest operation in the country. In his first three years in office, he saved more than £200,000 in comparison with the old police authority. This is not a case of a profligate police and crime commissioner trying to make a particular case to Government.

This issue has spanned the terms of Labour and Conservative Governments. Like the Home Affairs Committee, we welcome the Minister’s willingness to engage in the funding formula right. We are doing all the things that we are being asked to do, and doing the right thing by our residents. Everything that would be expected of Bedfordshire is being done. The acid test of this police formula is whether Bedfordshire and other significantly disadvantaged forces are properly funded, alongside other police forces. It is now time for the formula, the Minister and the Government to do right by us.

4.56 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I want to begin by stating what Her Majesty’s inspector of constabulary for West Midlands police, Wendy Williams, said about the force in her most recent report. She believes that it is “exceptionally well prepared to face future financial challenges.”

She says that it has “robust management” of its current demand, finances and plans for change, and that it has embarked on an impressive five-year change programme to transform how it intends to deliver policing. In last year’s Valuing the Police programme, which considered how forces met the challenge of the first spending review, West Midlands police was judged to be outstanding. I thank the Labour police and crime commissioner, David Jamieson, our former chief constable, Chris Sims, and our new chief constable, Dave Thompson, for doing such a good job on our behalf.

The Government have suggested that west midlands Labour MPs are wrong to complain that our police are being short-changed. The Minister thinks that West Midlands police is squirrelling away money and sitting on huge reserves. Let us look at the reserves of the largest force in England and Wales outside the Met. Not only does it serve a population of nearly 3 million people and an area of some 348 square miles, but, as HMIC notes, the area served by the West Midlands force faces the most significant challenge of terrorism and extremism outside London—a point alluded to by the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry). The force is in fact a national lead in the delivery of counter-terrorism.

The force complies with the requirement to hold a general reserve—in its case, about £12 million, which can be compared with figures of about £26 million and £23 million for the Met and West Yorkshire police. Of its remaining reserves, about £10 million is set aside to address redundancy and equal pay, in a force still suffering the fall-out from the “A19” forced retirements. A further £12 million is set aside for the self-funded insurance reserve. I expect the Minister is familiar with the problems of insurance for police vehicles and how most forces hold a reserve to cover this. About £3 million is set aside for the uniforms and protective equipment reserve, which is not a high figure for the second largest force in the country; about £2.1 million for the major incident reserve; and about £18 million for the capital reserve. The Minister will be aware that his officials advised that forces should prepare for a reduction in the capital grant in this year’s settlement. I understand that the capital grant for the west midlands is now about £2.9 million—a cut of about £2 million on previous years.

Like Her Majesty’s inspector of constabulary, I see a force with robust management of demand and finances, and one that has proved to be outstanding in facing up to the challenges that austerity has imposed on it. It is misleading for anyone to suggest that it is sitting on massive reserves, and I invite the Minister to look again at the figures before anyone in the Government is tempted to repeat such a charge.

On the question of the formula, may I invite the Minister to clear up the situation with regard to claims by the Conservative PCC for Northamptonshire that he has been led to expect a transfer of funding from urban forces such as West Midlands police to rural forces such as his? Last week, the Home Secretary did not feel able to tell my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) that she was not planning such a transfer of funds. Would the Minister like to take this opportunity to come clean about his intentions?

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): The hon. Gentleman is citing the figures with which I supplied him, so I will not contradict
them. I will give my interpretation of them when I sum up. There is no funding formula change on the books, so nobody can say that they are going to be better or worse off until we come forward with the formula.

Steve McCabe: It is certainly true that the Minister gave me a glimpse of some of the figures and I am extremely grateful to him for that, but let me reiterate my point: the Conservative PCC said that he had been tipped off that there would be a transfer of funds from urban to rural forces. My constituents want to know why more money is needed to police Surrey and Northamptonshire than to police the west midlands. Why do we get less while they get more?

Mr Kevan Jones: We could ask the same question about the local government formula, which gives more money to Surrey than to deprived areas such as Durham and my hon. Friend’s area. The suspicion is that this funding formula will also be used to divert money away from Labour areas to Conservative areas.

Steve McCabe: If we look at past form, we will see that that is certainly the implication. I was interested to hear the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) implore the Minister to think again about fair funding, on the basis that a fairer funding arrangement would give the force in Dorset an extra £1.9 million a year. I remind the Minister that, under the same fairer funding formula, the west midlands would get an extra £40 million year. When it comes to the transfer of resources, I hope he will bear that in mind.

The reality is that, far from getting extra funding, over the past five years our force has had to contend with £180 million of cuts—the highest in the country. The workforce has been reduced by 3,000 and the incoming chief constable has been clear that the force will need to reorganise to “cope with the gaps”—those are his words—that it now has to carry. The mistakes in the formula mean that forces are now planning against a one-year rather than four-year profile, which will be a much more difficult challenge. I would like to hear the Minister explain how he thinks the chief constable of West Midlands police is meant to plug those gaps.

I want to be clear that I do not deride the Home Secretary for saying that volunteers with specialist skills in IT or accountancy might be useful in helping to tackle cybercrime. I am curious to know why it is necessary to create a new position of police support volunteer, rather than simply recruiting more special constables with particular skills and expertise. Is that part of a wider volunteer plan?

Mike Penning: The answer is very simple. A special constable is an unpaid but warranted officer, the same as a full-time officer. Many people do not want to carry the warrant, but they want to help their local police force. That is why there is a separate category and they are not all specials. If they were, they would all have to be warranted.

Steve McCabe: I am grateful to the Minister for that response, and perhaps he will show us the consultation that took place to show the support that exists for the new role of police support volunteer. I would welcome the opportunity to have a look at that.

To go back to funding for a second, does the Minister really consider it a triumph for his colleagues the hon. Members for Solihull (Julian Knight) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood) to claim credit for a 4.6% rise in the police precept paid by the taxpayers of the west midlands to make up for the money being given to places such as Surrey and Northamptonshire? Is that how we will be forced to plug the gap—by paying more pounds for fewer police in our area?

We are repeatedly advised that crime has fallen and therefore, by implication, the Government’s cuts are justified. I assume that the Minister does not dispute the claims of the Office for National Statistics that crime rose by 6% nationally for the year ending September 2015, and that violence against the person rose by 13%.

I do not dispute that some types of crime have fallen, but I am not interested in trying to manipulate the figures to mislead anyone. Is it not important that the Government give a full picture and come clean on what the figures actually mean?

James Berry: Does the hon. Gentleman concede that that report stated that there had been an increase in the recording of crime, and that the reporting and recording of crime have improved a great deal, which explains some of the rise that has been seen?

Steve McCabe: I concede that the report actually said that certain types of sexual offences were being reported differently, which accounted for the rise in that area. The report also clearly pointed out that violence against the person had risen by 13%, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman accepts that. As I said, we need clarity on the figures rather than using them to try to paint a picture that may be misleading.

There is one more point I would like to make. As I indicated earlier, the West Midlands force faces the most significant challenge of terrorism and extremism outside London, and we recently suffered a spate of gun crime in parts of Birmingham. The chief constable is set to increase the number of armed officers, and I understand that that is in line with Home Office advice. West Midlands police has about 260 armed officers, and an uplift in line with Home Office thinking would mean a further 130 officers. Where will the funding for those additional armed police officers come from, and where will the personnel come from? Will the force be expected to recruit additional officers, or will those engaged in neighbourhood policing or response policing be required to transfer to those new duties, further depleting those available for existing police tasks?

It is not bluff and bluster that we need today, but honest answers to legitimate questions and queries from people such as myself, who are genuinely worried that the formula, the funding and the rhetoric do not match the heroic efforts of West Midlands police to meet the demands of the community that it seeks to serve.

5.9 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): We know that the UK Government have consulted on the funding formula for police forces in England and Wales, as they seek to simplify funding arrangements for the service. We also know that any changes in the funding arrangements have been delayed until 2016-17. Indeed, that was set out very eloquently by the right
hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). Because of Barnett consequentials, which are so important for funding services across the UK, I want to say a few words about policing in Scotland.

As many in the House will be aware, the SNP Scottish Government have carried out a reorganisation of policing in Scotland, with eight area forces merged into a unitary force in 2013. The Scottish Government now fund policing directly through the Scottish Police Authority. It is worth pointing out that that had cross-party support, although—perhaps this is in their nature—the Lib Dems subsequently withdrew their support. I would point out, if I may, that in Scotland, despite the major reform implemented by the Scottish Government, which has delivered significant savings, the Scottish Government have continued to protect their commitment to 1,000 additional police officers, all in the teeth of harsh Westminster cuts.

There is no doubt that we are having to make some very hard decisions in Scotland about the police budget, but, under the recent budget, the police revenue budget will be protected in real terms in every year of the next Parliament, with a boost of £100 million between 2016 and 2021. However, it must be said that some of the hard decisions the Scottish Government have to make are a direct consequence of the UK Government's refusal to give Police Scotland the same VAT status as every other police authority in the United Kingdom. The same applies to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service.

Mr Kevan Jones: It is your own doing.

Patricia Gibson: I can hear somebody chuntering from a sedentary position. If the hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, I would be delighted to hear what he has to say.

Mr Jones: The fact is that the Scottish Government agreed to the VAT proposals.

Patricia Gibson: For the avoidance of any doubt, I want to point out that although the Scottish Government were aware of that, it does not make it right.

Mike Penning rose—

Patricia Gibson: No. Perhaps the Minister will let me finish my point before he starts chuntering. The Scottish Government agreed to that because they had no choice. They are working within the constraints imposed on them by Westminster. I should say—I am moving forward now—that like so many other deals in Scotland, it was imposed by a UK Government who are detached from Scotland and neither understand nor care about Scotland’s public services. I shall leave the matter there.

Mr Jones rose—

Mike Penning rose—

Patricia Gibson: If you do not like giving fair funding formulae to Scotland, you had your chance last September, when you kicked and screamed to hold on to us. In the light of that decision last September, all we ask for is fairness. We are of course a valued and equal partner—well, let us be so.

Mr Jones rose—

Mike Penning rose—

Patricia Gibson: I have dealt with that point comprehensively.

Mr Jones: No you haven’t. You’ve just ignored it.

Patricia Gibson: I have not ignored it.

Mr Jones: Yes you have.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If the hon. Lady wishes to give way, she will give way. If she does not want to give way, we all have to respect that.

Patricia Gibson: I would simply add that holding an axe over someone’s head because they do not—

Mr Jones: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We are used to the breathtaking arrogance of the SNP in this place, but it is completely wrong if an hon. Member raises a point that is clearly wrong and does not allow other hon. Members to question it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As you well know from the numerous—[Interruption.] I will deal with it, Mr Arkless. It will be easier if I do. As you well know, Mr Jones, that is not a point of order. If we were to rely on something that we believed not to be correct, we would never—[Interruption.] We would never, ever get through a debate. You and other Members in this House will continue to have different views. We will not always agree. On this occasion, it is not a point of order for the Chair.

Patricia Gibson rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, no, just sit down. Let us see if we can help. I want to progress the debate. I do not want it to deteriorate.

Patricia Gibson: I was simply going to add that anyone in this Chamber would think, Mr Deputy Speaker, that a unique VAT charge for Scotland’s police force and fire service—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Do not bring the Chair into the argument because the Chair will not rule on the debate. I am here to chair the debate, not to make a decision on who is right and who is wrong. I will let you continue with your speech.

Patricia Gibson: The Scottish Police Authority, uniquely and therefore unfairly, is the only police authority in the entire UK—

Mike Penning: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: No, thank you. I want to progress beyond this point.
uniquely and therefore unfairly, the Scottish Police Authority is the only police authority in the United Kingdom that cannot recover VAT. It is therefore liable for an annual cost of £25 million, which is equivalent to almost the entire forecast savings gap. Importantly, it seems that the Treasury based its decision on the fact that single services will be funded by central Government. However, the Treasury introduced a new section in the Value Added Tax Act 1994 to ensure that central Government-funded academy schools in England could recover VAT. Why is there not the same provision for the Scottish police and Scottish fire and rescue services?

Mr Kevan Jones: Because you didn’t ask for it!

Patricia Gibson: Well, I’m asking for it now. Why do I mention all this, apart from the fact that it is about fairness?

Mr Jones: Because you’re a victim.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Jones, it will be easier if I can hear what is being said. I was hoping that you would speak next. We do not want to spoil that, because I want to hear from you.

Patricia Gibson: Apart from the fairness issue, I mention this matter today because this is a debate about managing budgets, and Scotland is being short-changed by the unique VAT charge that is levied on its police and fire services, taking significant funds out of those important and hard-pressed budgets. It is simply not fair. The people of Scotland take a very dim view of it indeed, as well they should.

Despite the budgetary pressures that Westminster is imposing on Scotland, with a real-terms reduction in Scotland’s budget of £1.5 billion or a 5.7% cut in the funding for day-to-day public services over the next four years as a result of the comprehensive spending review, crime in Scotland is at its lowest level in over 41 years. Violent crime is down by 55% since 2006-07.

I believe it was Benjamin Franklin who said that the only certainties in life were death and taxation. He was certainly right about the first, but what has happened with multinational companies in the UK under successive Westminster Governments may have proven him to be a bit off the mark on the second. There is another certainty in life that Mr Franklin overlooked, which is that the one thing that is sure not to be debated during a Westminster debate on estimates is the estimates. The issue of debating the estimates may not exercise the minds of the general public, but I believe that is because it is not well known outside this place how little scrutiny there is of the spending plans of the respective Departments. The scrutiny is negligible and that has suited successive Governments. If the public knew just how inscrutable the process was, I am sure they would have something to say about it.

The supply estimates process is very technical and that is how spending is approved by Parliament, but we must remember in this debate that during the debates on English votes for English laws, the Leader of the House noted the possibility of a review of this process, while at the same time being adamant that the estimates process already allowed us to affect the Barnett consequentials. I simply say that the Procedure Committee, on which I sit, is reviewing the estimates process. We have heard from many distinguished and learned experts—far more learned and distinguished than I, if you can believe that, Mr Deputy Speaker. People from all sides of the political spectrum have argued when discussing EVEL that the estimates process is simply not fit for purpose.

Perhaps I may crave your indulgence a little longer. Mr Deputy Speaker, and point out that the way this House deals with the supply and estimates procedure is simply not sustainable. We need proper debate about the supply procedure to achieve clarity on Barnett consequentials. The scrutiny of the estimates process is simply not robust enough, and this Parliament—the so-called mother of Parliaments—has the least scrutinised spending arrangements in the western world. The process is such that the procedures simply do not give MPs a full opportunity to scrutinise Barnett consequentials of England-only, or England and Wales-only, legislation. Such scrutiny is required in a mature and healthy democracy, and a consequence of EVEL should be reform of the supply process, and that the interests of this matter be a ‘process of development’. That expression is a direct quote from the Leader of the House, who promised and envisaged that on 22 October 2015. Mr Speaker said that he could not conceive of any Bill that did not have direct Barnett consequentials, and that if there is such a Bill, we Scottish Members could take part in the estimates—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Lady craved my indulgence, which I have been very good and given. She answered her own question, which is that the Procedure Committee, rather than today’s debate, is the right vehicle in which to take up this issue. I have allowed some indulgence, which I think was only fair, but we must move back to the core of the debate.

Patricia Gibson: I take on board what you say, Mr Deputy Speaker, and having craved your indulgence and maximised the level of the patience that you kindly showed me, I was about to return to the police funding formula. Any discussion of policing budgets in England must in all fairness and justice consider any effects and consequences for Scotland, not least VAT, which is a running sore of injustice in Scotland. Our police in Scotland do an excellent job, but they must have a level playing field. When considering police budgets, I ask all Members who represent English and Welsh constituencies to remember the inconvenient truth that the police in Scotland have a VAT ball and chain round their ankle, which picks money out of the pocket of the police budget to the tune of £25 million every year. No other police authority in the United Kingdom has to contend with that. Saying that Scotland accepted it is simply not good enough. Any reasonable minded person would demand that it stop, and it should stop now. After all, Scotland is supposed to be a valued and equal partner in this Union, and there is nothing equal about the VAT burden.

5.22 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) prayed for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker—but indulgence was not what I was praying for. What we have just seen is what we usually get from the SNP when
they turn on something that they agreed to with the victim mentality that, as I have said on numerous occasions, it has raised to a new art form in this House. We end up with the idea that somehow this measure is everybody else’s fault, but the hon. Lady’s Government agreed to it so I do not think that she can try to delude electors in Scotland that it is somehow the fault of English Members and the Government at Westminster. Apart from the sense of grievance, which we have heard on many occasions from the Scottish National party in the House in recent weeks and months, the hon. Lady did not cover anything that was relevant to the debate.

I congratulate the Home Affairs Committee on its report on reform of the funding formula, and I pay tribute to its Chair for his opening speech. It has been said numerous times that this issue needs to be considered for years and in a logical way. I do not disagree with that, because we must consider in detail how we fund our police, as that is an important issue for our constituents. I do not believe that how the Government went about it has raised to a new art form in this House. We end up with a victim mentality that, as I have said on numerous occasions, the Minister is a pretty straightforward guy. Given that we have ended up in this situation and that we have been unable to resolve it—it will be four years before police forces can plan a long-term budget—would not the fair thing be to remove any doubt or suspicion and subject the formula to independent scrutiny? In that way, we could all be absolutely certain that it was fair.

Mr Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend—will come back to that in a minute—but the real issue is that what was envisaged is exactly what we have seen in local government. Under the new formula, the resources would not have been devolved to the areas that needed them, but the blame for the cuts would have been. The Government have used that formula for many years now.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) is not in the Chamber, which is regrettable. He complained about the formula and the distribution. In my local authority over the past five years, we have had five times the amount of cuts that South Dorset has had. I am fearful that the police funding formula will do the same to policing as the Government did to local government.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That was exactly what was designed in the formula. The Government were found out by the PCC for Devon and Cornwall. I accept what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) said about the Minister, but he is just a small cog in the huge machine. The machine is about devolving blame but not resources to local authorities. They devolve the blame to local decision makers and point the finger at them when cuts have to be made. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is the real villain of the piece, can stand back and say, “Not me, guv!”

Since 2010, £2.2 billion—22% of the funding—has been taken out of police budgets in this country. I do not accept that an average constituent of mine understands how police funding is arrived at. It is unique in the sense that two-thirds of it—the bulk of it—comes from central Government. Many people feel that what they pay, for example in local rates, pays for local services. We know that that is not the case.

The system is very uneven. Some authorities are able to raise more in local precept than others. Areas such as mine are unable to raise a large amount. In Durham, 55% of properties are band A, so a 2% increase in the budget would raise nothing like the amount that could be raised in Surrey or in other parts of the country. That leads me to one of the issues highlighted by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the autumn statement: the ability to argue that some of the lower precept local authorities can now not be bound by the 2% limit but by a 5% increase.

Again, all that does is help the wealthier areas. If we were allowed to do that in Durham, it would raise hardly anything compared with some of the more well-off forces such as Essex, Herefordshire and others. Again, that needs to be looked at.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is another issue that relates to vulnerable and deprived areas, which is the top-slicing of grants? Next year, there will be a 69% rise in the top-slicing of police grants. In my area of Greater
Manchester, that means a reduction of £16.2 million. Does he agree that we need an assurance that top-slicing for national projects, such as the transformation fund, does not come from local police grants?

Mr Jones: I agree. That is another sleight of hand by the Chancellor. We have only to look at local government and the new homes bonus, which is trumpeted as a great opportunity for local authorities to raise money. What do the Government do, but top-slice it in exactly the way my hon. Friend describes?

In Durham, the ability to raise extra funds from precept is limited and any future formula needs to take that into account. In the autumn statement, the Chancellor said that policing would be protected and that money would fall from heaven. I am sorry, but that is not going to happen. As my hon. Friend says, there will be top-slicing. It is clear, from what police and crime commissioners have said, that there will still be pressure this year on the police budget. Any type of formula needs to consider the local tax yield and the ability of places such as Durham to raise additional expenditure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) raised the issue of disproportionate cuts. In Durham, since 2010 we have lost 350 officers and another 25 police community support officers. Before anyone says that Durham is a profligate, fat and inefficient police force, let me say that it is the only one in the country to receive three “outstanding” ratings for efficiency from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) highlighted in his speech, great steps have been taken by police forces, working with local authorities, health services and other police forces, to drive up efficiency. I am not opposed to that—indeed, it is to be welcomed. However, police forces will come to the point where they cannot be any more efficient. At the end of the day, local people want police on the streets. They want police who are responsive and they want localised policing. That cannot be done. There comes a point in the process where the service that local people desire cannot be delivered.

We have seen the same happen in local government, where many local authorities are being pared back to delivering statutory services alone. Are we going to see a similar situation in policing? If a drive to a small state Conservative Britain is the Government’s ultimate aim, they need to be honest about that, rather than hide behind this type of funding formula.

The police community, local politicians and police and crime commissioners have lost all faith that the Home Office can conduct this review properly and fairly. I support what the Select Committee has suggested—taking it out of the hands of the Home Office. Otherwise, it will lead to a suspicion that the Chancellor is in the background and wants to use this as a way of driving out not efficiency but cash from the police service.

It is possibly a terrible thing to say, but I think it is true that if it had not been for the tragic events in Paris, we would have faced even deeper cuts to police forces. With that in mind, and with respect, it is not down to my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) or the Labour party that this U-turn took place; it was because of the Government’s fear that after the tragic events in Paris, there would be an outcry if they persisted with the cuts they intended to put through.

There is a drive for simplicity in the formula. I have always been in favour of making things as simple as possible in public policy. If making things simpler makes them less accurate and less transparent, however, I would be against it. Clearly, the interaction with other budgets is important—I mentioned mental health earlier—and it needs to be looked at. A policing element is needed. We cannot say to mental health trusts, “You will have to pay for part of your local area’s policing.” It is important that the interconnections are taken into account.

Deprivation is another crucial issue. Durham is a rural county, but under these proposals it is obviously not rural enough—or perhaps I should say that it is not blue enough—to get much money out of making representations about the formula. Rural areas such as Durham are unique. I describe parts of County Durham and parts of my own constituency as being very rural yet having urban problems. The problems would be recognised in any urban area—drug and alcohol-related crime and even organised crime, along with deprivation and the high level of crime associated with it. That is why we need to take into account not only rurality, but the realities of what is happening on the ground.

The argument about using licensed premises as an indicator of alcohol problems is, I think, complete nonsense. The public image that comes through from many of our national newspapers is that the real crime problems arise as people spill out of wine bars after a happy hour. No, they do not. People should speak to the police locally. One of the biggest issues is alcohol in the home, but how to reflect that in a formula is going to be difficult. Reflecting alcohol disturbance in an area according to the number of bars in it will not provide an answer to the problem.

Let me finish by paying tribute to the men and women of Durham constabulary, who have had a tough last six years. There are 350 former colleagues who no longer pound the beat in Durham, yet it has met the challenges when it comes to driving efficiency and interacting with the community, which has been reflected in the HMRC report that rates the force as outstanding. I pay tribute to Chief Constable Mike Barton and to the Labour police and crime commissioner, Ron Hogg. They have worked closely together not only to drive innovation and efficiency in the delivery of service, but to look at innovative ways of providing alternative justice, for example. They are making a real impact locally: when initiatives are launched, they are not always popular, but they are having a real impact on the ground.

Finally, let me touch on the relationship with other forces. I am in favour of reducing costs, and if Durham police can work with those on Teesside to form a joint firearms or dog handling unit that is great, but I have a problem with some of the proposals to merge other blue-light services that the Government are driving through. Obviously some efficiency savings can be made through the merging of back-office functions in, for instance, the fire and rescue services, but we must be careful not to repeat the imposition of cuts on those services on the grounds that their job can somehow be merged with, or massaged into, a policing role. If sensible
things can be done in back offices. I am all for that, but blurring the edges when it comes to the front-line delivery of fire services, and other services, is a different matter altogether.

I hope that we have a proper look at the funding formula, and the sooner we do it, the better. Any review must be independent, because the Home Office thinks that credibility has been shredded. The one thing that I do not trust at all is an arrangement whereby the Conservative Government and the Chancellor are behind this, driving forward not a fairer funding formula but a formula that will divert resources from areas like mine into leafy Tory suburbs.

5.40 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me an opportunity to speak today. I did not speak in the recent debate on police funding, but many concerns were expressed by Labour Members then, and those concerns remain. There is much uncertainty and worry in police forces across the country about current and future funding.

It was just a few months ago, in November, that Members were in the Chamber making a case for policing to be protected from the ravages of Tory cuts. Labour Members joined others, and people throughout the country, in raising concerns about policing cuts generally. The Government had originally planned to cut police budgets by more than 20%, but at the last moment the Chancellor announced, in his spending review statement to the House, that there would be no cuts, adding that there would be real-terms protection for police funding. However, it seems that the Tories are still intent on cutting police funding. Today we are discussing reform of the police funding formula. The Government may have tried to deflect attention from what they are doing by saying that there will be no cuts, but the fact remains that the level of police funding to which the Government are committed for the next few years will go down.

We know that the Tories had to cancel the last review of the police funding formula last autumn because they had miscalculated, using the wrong figures. Last week, Labour pleaded with the Government to think again before imposing further cuts and forcing local people to pay more to make up for them, because they are expecting police forces to raise extra money in local taxes to compensate for those Tory cuts. No matter how the Government try to dress things up, a cut is a cut. What we need is a fair funding formula—a formula that is fair to the less affluent, high-need, high-crime areas—but we are not being given that now.

I speak as someone who grew up with a huge amount of respect for the police, and for the job that they do. I worked closely with neighbourhood policing teams for many years in my previous role as a county councillor, and I have always appreciated the professionalism of police officers who put their lives on the line every day. Unfortunately, under this Government we have seen the break-up of the neighbourhood policing model that was the last Labour Government’s achievement. Neighbourhood policing brought police officers out of their stations and into communities, building up trust and bringing down crime, but the positive steps that were taken under Labour are being reversed.

If the Government proceed with their cuts, and unless a proper funding formula is developed, matters will become worse. In the last six months alone, a further 1,300 police officers have been lost: that is the equivalent of a whole force in some areas. The Tories had already cut police funding by 25% during the last Parliament, and the most recent losses bring the total reduction in the number of police officers to a staggering 18,000 since 2010. Officers are already paying the price for the Government’s actions. The reduction in their numbers has put greater pressure on those who remain, who have found their workloads soaring and workplace pressures intensifying. For instance, 27% are working more than 49 hours a week, which is over the legal limit.

Crime might have fallen in some areas, and the police are trying to reduce crime, but policing is about much more than whether crime is falling. It is about visible policing and providing reassurance to the residents of our communities. We also know that crime is changing, rather than simply falling. When the 6 million cybercrimes and online crimes are included in the official crime statistics, crime levels nearly double.

With the most serious and violent crimes on the rise again, this is the worst possible time to cut police funding, but that is what this Chancellor is doing. He said he would protect police budgets, but we are facing more years of cuts. Make no mistake, the police service is under pressure and the morale of police officers is at a very low ebb. Police officers have spoken to feel that the Government do not understand or appreciate the passion and commitment that they have for the job they do. We should be focusing on cutting crime, not on cutting the police.

One of the few areas to have seen an increase in the policing family is the police and community support officers in Wales. Since 2010, South Wales police has increased the number of PCSOs by 77 and Gwent has seen an increase of 35. This is due to funding support from the Welsh Labour Government, who have supported a total of 500 PCSOs across Wales despite significant cuts to their own budget by the Tory Government. My constituency of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney is covered by two forces: South Wales on the Merthyr side and Gwent on the Rhymney side. In the next financial year, South Wales police will see a real-terms cut of £3 million and Gwent a cut of £1.5 million. The need for support from the police service is significant in many of the communities that I represent, but with this level of cuts, that support is under threat.

As I have said, this is not the time to be making cuts to services such as policing. The safety of our communities is too important to put at risk. The people who live in our communities need adequate protection from the police service, but the lack of a fair funding formula will put that at risk as it will not provide the police with the resources that they need to do the job.

James Berry: Will the hon. Gentleman dissociate himself from the shadow Home Secretary’s comment, made on the Floor of the House, that the police could take a funding cut of 10%?

Gerald Jones: That was not the situation that the shadow Home Secretary described, and I think the hon. Gentleman knows that. He is trying to misrepresent
what was said. The Conservatives were talking about cuts of 20%-plus at that point, so let us get this into perspective.

Mr Kevan Jones: Non-ring-fenced Departments were asked by the Chancellor to find cuts of up to 40%. If such cuts had gone through in the Home Office, policing budgets would certainly have been cut by more than 10%.

Gerald Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I think we are seeing a lot of smoke and mirrors from the Conservative party. In closing, I urge the Government to address the concerns that I have outlined, and to provide the fair funding formula that the police need to do the job that we ask them to do.

5.48 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I took part in the debate last week, and I will repeat something that I said at the time. I want to put on record again a big thank you to the staff and officers of Merseyside police. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) has today given the House a measured and generous analysis and exposition of the funding formula debacle. I am not of a mind to be as generous as him, however, because the tensions that that created right across the police service are still being felt. There is a fear that we shall find ourselves in a similar situation again and that it will be just as unfair and just as much of a debacle.

I should like to apologise in advance to either the Home Secretary or the Home Affairs Committee. I say that because one or other of them is trying to sell the House a very large pup. Last week, the Home Secretary led the House to believe that the police service was led the House to believe that the police service was awash with money, regardless of the review. She said that in any event it is the quality of police officers, not the quantity, that counts—I particularly remember that one. She said, in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham):

“‘When the right hon. Gentleman calls on the Government to provide real-terms protection for the policing budget, I can happily tell Members that we have done just that.’—[Official Report, 24 February 2016; Vol. 606, c. 389.]”

Of course, I heaved a sigh of relief at that reassurance—after all, she has the responsibility for keeping the Queen’s peace, and I am sure she would not want to let Her Majesty down in that regard. However, the Home Affairs Committee report appears to take a different view from that of the Home Secretary, saying:

“The real terms reductions in central grant to police forces as a whole has only varied between 24% and 26% since 2010/11...However, the range for real terms reductions for individual forces was from 12% for Surrey to 23% for Northumbria and West Midlands, the two forces most reliant on government grant.”

The Home Secretary is therefore being proactive selective, with the air of an amnesiac about her, and it is a disingenuous approach if ever there was one.

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice told us that the West Midlands police and crime commissioner—this, to some extent, reinforces the point my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) made—had again, my relief was palpable, as the Minister had pulled the Home Secretary’s chestnut out of the fire. Clearly, the implication was that police services right across the country had secret stashes of cash, gleaned from the ill-gotten gains of chief constables.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does what my hon. Friend is suggesting not reiterate that we are seeing something that is happening across government? The same arguments are being used by those in the Department for Communities and Local Government when they attack councils for having large reserves, even though a reserve can be spent only once and in cases such as Durham’s a lot of those reserves are already earmarked?

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, but I am too much of a gentleman to call what the Government are doing claptrap. Clearly, the implication being given was that all this money has been stashed away: serving officers have, with malice aforethought, picked the pockets of the poor, unsuspecting council taxpayers, with the nefarious intention of protecting them from—wait for it—crime! Of course, what the Minister, mimicking the amnesia of the Home Secretary, forgot to mention was that a comprehensive public report brought before the West Midlands police and crime panel on 15 October last year by the PCC’s chief finance officer clearly set out that:

“This report details by 2020 it is forecast over 80% of the WMPCC’s reserves will be used to support the MTFP—medium-term financial plan—transformation programmes or other initiatives.”

Therefore, out of a turnover of two thirds of a billion pounds, the West Midlands PCC will, by 2020, have reserves of about £27 million, or just 4.5%.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend comes from a local government background, so does he also find it remarkable that, in respect of not just the Home Office, but local government, the Government seem to mix revenue and capital willy-nilly? Like me, he knows from his time in local government that one of the cardinal sins was using capital for revenue purposes, unless it was for investment to save—

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend just set out clearly the jiggery-pokery finances of this Government. That is what it is—it is hocus-pocus. By 2020, this Minister, or his successor, will no doubt be accusing the West Midlands police of flying by the seat of its pants for having such small reserves. In any event, the West Midlands PCC was already doing what the Minister was, post-hoc, suggesting that he should do. Evidently, there is a contagion of disingenuity in the Home Office.

More shocking were the contents of the Home Affairs Committee report of December 2015. In last week’s Opposition day debate on police funding, we had this Minister refusing to take interventions, with the exception of those from one or two of his own Members, in full obsequious mode. I am afraid that his insouciant and dismissive attitude towards Members of this House has antecedents—in other words, he has form.

Mike Penning rose—

Peter Dowd: No, I will not give way.
Mike Penning: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, this is completely unacceptable. I seek your guidance on how I can correct the record. The reason I took interventions when I did—and I did take some from the Opposition—is that the shadow Home Secretary spoke for 35 minutes and destroyed the debate. How do I get that on the record?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I think you already have.

Peter Dowd: Let me repeat that the right hon. Gentleman’s insouciant and dismissive attitude towards Members of this House has antecedents—in other words, he has form. It extended to last year’s police funding formula consultation process, which was widely agreed to be an unmitigated disaster—there are no other words for it. The Home Affairs Committee said:

“It is regrettable that the Minister proceeded on this timescale, and it is unfortunate that he accepted that advice from officials. It is not surprising that, as a result, the process ended in chaos”— I repeat that police funding in Britain ended in chaos—“with an Urgent Question in Parliament and the decision to suspend the whole review.”

James Berry: The reason for that, as is clear in the Home Affairs Committee’s report, is that a civil servant made a fundamental error in calculations, for which the Minister came to the House to apologise and for which he was commended in this report.

Peter Dowd: Yes, and made Inspector Clouseau look like a completely competent professional. The Committee, not content with giving the Minister one caution, went on to give him a warning.

“The Home Office stated on multiple occasions throughout this process that it wished to engage with police forces but then created a process which made it impossible for them to do so.”

Question 20 in the police formula review consultation document asked:

“How long should the transitional period last? Please explain your answer.”

What is telling was the response from Merseyside’s PCC, Jane Kennedy—among other roles, she was a former Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office with responsibility for security and the justice system, and is someone who knows a thing or two about these matters—who said:

“Given the lack of detail with regard to the magnitude of the proposed changes I am unable to give an informed response.”

It was a former Minister with responsibility for security who said that to Her Majesty’s Government. There was no political point scoring and no histrionics, simply a factual and unambiguous response to a flawed consultation process from a PCC concerned about the service for which she is responsible and for which she is held accountable.

There are many other even more interesting nuggets in the Committee’s report, but I will not take up the time of the House regurgitating them, because, as with any regurgitation, it is not a very pleasant experience for those watching, including for the right hon. Gentleman. The reality in this sorry affair is that I am not too concerned about the embarrassment of Members on the Government Benches who felt the need to produce such a damning report—consensus was the word used—or the embarrassment of the Home Secretary or the Policing Minister for that matter. What I am concerned about is how the Government’s botched, incompetent and chaotic formula review created uncertainty in communities across the country and the effect that that had on the morale of police officers of all ranks, not to mention the exasperation caused to any number of police and crime commissioners of all political hues. Rural areas and communities have expressed concerned about the numbers of police officers because of the sparsity factor. That puts paid to the claim by the Home Secretary that size does not matter. How many of her colleagues on the Government Benches would voluntarily agree to a reduction in police numbers in their own areas?

Presumably, the logic of the Home Secretary is that they would be falling over themselves volunteering to take police officers off the street. There would be few takers for that—so much for the argument about quality over quantity. I also wonder how many Members on the Government Benches are prepared to call public meetings in their constituencies trumpeting the need for fewer bobbies on the beat because the Home Secretary thinks that quality, not quantity, counts. How many Government Members have the courage of the Home Secretary’s convictions? Does the Home Secretary have the courage of her convictions? What a great slogan in Maidenhead: “Vote for me and have fewer police officers on the streets.” After all, it is quality, not quantity, that counts. If the Home Secretary is so taken with having fewer police officers, let her have fewer in her constituency and not in mine. If the Policing Minister is so enamoured with having fewer police officers from Apsley to Woodhall, he should put it on his website for all to see. Perhaps he could have a photo in his gallery or a spot the difference competition before and after the implementation of a new botched policing formula.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman has pointed out, quite sensibly in my view, that nobody would volunteer to have fewer police on the streets and nobody would volunteer to have less money spent on policing, yet that is exactly the accusation that has been made against the Scottish Government in this Chamber today—that we volunteered to give away £25 million a year to the Treasury.

Peter Dowd: Let me return, if I may, to the Select Committee’s report. The outstanding understatement in a report packed full of understatements was the following:

“The outcome for police funding in the Spending Review came as a surprise to many interested parties, including the policing community.”

I suspect that it came as a surprise to the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister, as well.

Finally, what would be most surprising is the unbridled ability of the Home Secretary, aided and abetted by the Policing Minister, to botch the review, leading to uncertainty, a reduction in police numbers and quality, and a serious threat to resilience and, ultimately, to the safety of the public from Maidenhead to Merseyside via Hemel Hempstead and many other communities across the country. The message from this House is quite simple: the police service is not safe in Tory hands.
Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I am delighted to see you in your place, Mr Speaker. May I assure you that this has been a very, very long afternoon? Since I was elected nine months ago, I seem to have come to debates with time limits of three, four or five minutes, and it was always my ambition to take part in an open and wide debate, but that optimism was unfortunately formed before my experience this afternoon.

Let me start by echoing the comments of the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd). I too want to mention something that has been missed in many of the submissions across the House today. Our police, on both sides of the border, in every borough, county and region, do the most incredible job. We owe our safety and the facts that we can walk out of our front door and feel safe to the men and women in our police services, as well as other staff. Politics aside, we should all recognise that.

Mr Speaker, you will no doubt be aware that policing in Scotland is devolved, so many of the substantive arguments that have been heard across the Chamber during this very long afternoon have not had direct application to Scotland. I do not want to ponder many of them, but Scotland is affected by the level of Westminster spending and therefore the potential Barnett consequentials that Scotland will receive, or otherwise, to run the police force we want to run. It is remarkable, given the cuts that Scotland has faced, that we have given and maintained a commitment to 1,000 extra police officers on our streets since 2007, in stark contrast to the almost 20,000 police officers that have been lost across the UK. If I have one message to those on both sides of the House, it is that whatever funding formula they come up with and whatever departmental spending they agree over the next four years, the focus should be on increasing and maintaining the number of frontline police officers, which would obviously allow us to continue to do the work that we are doing.

Despite my cynicism about what went on in the past three hours, there have been some memorable speeches, none more so than that from the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, who gave a succinct, detailed and clear summary of the police funding position. I was very grateful for the clarity with which he delivered that speech.

I share the concern expressed by the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) for Hansard. I do not think that they will have their work cut out for them this evening finalising the draft of today’s proceedings. I was also very interested to hear him tell his Government and the House that the police funding formula as constituted does not seem to be working for the people of Dorset or the officers who work there.

The atmosphere in the Chamber was lifted briefly by my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). I invite interventions and corroborate her comments on the VAT position in Scotland. It seems to me, and it will seem to the Scottish people, that Scotland being treated fairly gets this Chamber greatly exercised. That will not be lost on the people of Scotland.

The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) did the strangest thing. He made an intervention, which was answered, and then raised a point of order, so the Government could intervene on my hon. Friend.
recent data from the NSPCC estimate that half a million children are being abused. Reports of domestic and sexual violence are increasing across the country.

Mr Kevan Jones: I commend my hon. Friend for her work in that area. Does she agree that that puts pressure on regional forces such as Durham’s, which is involved in Operation Seabrook, investigating abuse at the Medomsley detention centre—an operation that has cost more than £2 million?

Sarah Champion: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that issue, which I have tried to raise in this Chamber. Such cases are incredibly expensive and incredibly important, and that work needs to be done, but there is no additional money, so the money is coming from the existing pot. The Government really need to look seriously at funding those cases.

The numbers of serious and violent crimes are soaring. In the last year alone there has been a major increase in knife crime, which is up 9%, and a 27% rise in violent crime, including a 14% rise in murder. Devastatingly, 50% of those cases close without a single suspect ever being identified.

Central Government funding for police forces was cut by a quarter in the last Parliament, resulting in the loss of 18,000 police officers—12,000 of them operational front-line officers. Thousands of PCSOs and civilian staff have also been cut. We have ever fewer police officers trying to do ever more.

The value of local neighbourhood policing, with officers working in partnership with local authorities and other agencies to tackle the challenges we face, cannot be overestimated. However, neighbourhood policing teams—a proud legacy of the Labour Government—are being eroded. Serious crimes are up, but victims are being let down.

Despite all that, and after cutting the police by 25% in the last Parliament, the Government were threatening to cut at least a further 22% right up until the night before the comprehensive spending review. We were on the brink of catastrophe, but the Chancellor U-turned under pressure from Labour, the public and the police.

The Chancellor then made a promise:

“The Government recently announced that there would be no cuts to police funding next year. This was a little misleading. What has now become clear is that the police grant will be reduced by £1 million and there will be no provision for inflation—such as increases in salaries and additional demand on police services, which comes to about £7-8 million.”

The Tory police and crime commissioner for Devon and Cornwall said:

“policing still faces considerable challenges and some tough decisions as we move forward. We estimate that, to break even, we will need to save £13million over the next four years; only then with further savings can we plan to invest in transformation to address the emerging threats with less resources.”

These cuts mean that thousands more officers, PCSOs and police staff will still go. The more serious and complex crimes seen in the 21st century are expensive and time-consuming to investigate, prosecute and prevent, such as child sexual exploitation, terrorism and cyber-crime. These 21st-century challenges demand a modernised, more responsive and better equipped police service, not less police and fewer staff.

Equally crucial is co-operation with other agencies, yet as they too come under strain, the police yet again pick up the pieces. The Home Affairs Committee’s report emphasises that “demands on the police were increasing due to cuts to other public services.”

As local authorities deal with relentless Government cuts, they are struggling to provide specialist support to victims, to engage in preventive work with communities, and to protect vulnerable groups, particularly out of...
hours. Sara Thornton of the NSPCC told the Committee that the police were being used “more and more as society’s safety net” and that “after 4 o’clock on a Friday the police are around, but nobody is ever very clear about who else is around”.

In the face of these massive and growing challenges, not only are police budgets being cut, but cuts are being made with characteristic unfairness to less affluent regions. High-need, high-crime areas are shouldering the burden of cuts. West Midlands and Northumbria police forces, for example, have been hit twice as hard by cuts as Surrey. The current complex formula for funding the 42 police forces in England and Wales has been called “unclear, unfair and out of date” by Ministers. We therefore welcomed it when last year, under pressure from the police and from Labour, the Policing Minister finally agreed to change the formula. However, instead of improving the situation, what followed was a chaotic, opaque, unfair and ultimately completely discredited review of the existing formula. In the words of the Conservative police and crime commissioner for Devon and Cornwall, as quoted in the report, “given the fundamental importance of this policy to the safety and security of communities across the country we do not feel that consultation has been carried out in a proper manner”.

The review faced two unprecedented threats of legal action by forces. It was roundly criticised by police and crime commissioners from across the political spectrum. Unbelievably, the shambolic review ultimately had to be totally abandoned because the Home Office miscalculated funding for forces, using the wrong figures. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East for giving examples. The data error meant that funding for forces had been miscalculated by as much as £180 million for some areas. As the report says, the omnishambles “would be amusing if it were not so serious”.

It goes on:

“It is deplorable that Home Office officials made errors in calculating the funding allocations for police force areas...As a result of the Home Office’s error, confidence in the process has been lost; time, effort, resources and energy have been wasted; and the reputation of the Home Office has been damaged with its principal stakeholders.”

The mistake meant not only that forces made budgets for the next financial year based on incorrect funding figures, but that they now only know their funding for just one year, unlike local government, which got a four-year settlement. As even Tory PCCs have pointed out, this makes it extremely difficult for forces to make long-term financial plans and innovate on the basis of an unusual single-year settlement, particularly in the context of further budget cuts. As the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee said, to call it a shambles would be charitable.

What have the Government done to rectify the situation? They have secretly consulted their own Tory PCCs, promising to channel funding to those PCCs, who get disproportionately more. Conservative police and crime commissioner Adam Simons writes in his budget:

“The new funding formula proposals have been deferred to 2017-18...it is not clear at this stage how this will affect the government funding. However, it is expected that this will transfer funding from the urban areas to the more rural, and Northamptonshire may benefit”.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for pointing that out. Will the Policing Minister confirm whether this will be the case? In addition, what commitments will he give to this House, and to the police, that they will never again be insulted with a sham consultation like that seen last year on something so important and so crucial to the safety of communities as police funding? Our police service needs a fair funding formula and a fair funding settlement. This Government have offered them nothing of the sort.

6.19 pm

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): May I welcome the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) to the Dispatch Box? I think she may be there for some time, because she delivered a much better speech than those delivered by the shadow Policing Minister and the shadow Home Secretary last week.

I agreed with some of the hon. Lady’s comments, particularly her closing remarks about how this country and the police deserve a fair funding formula. The reason that did not happen under 13 years of Labour, and probably even before that, is that it is very difficult to achieve. As I have previously said from this Dispatch Box, there is no doubt that there will be winners and losers if we change the formula. As the Home Affairs Committee has said, however, the existing formula is opaque and we desperately need to change it—and fairly.

Steve McCabe: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: In a moment. I just want to make a little progress and then I promise that I will give way, because I am going to refer to the west midlands at length.

It is fair to say that policing is undergoing continuous change and that it has changed considerably even in the past five years. The National Audit Office has rightly indicated that the way in which we are making the reporting of crimes more effective and accurate should not be used in an attempt to say that crime has suddenly risen. Since 2010, for lots of different reasons, there has been a reduction in crime, but there have been some increases in the reporting figures in the past year. We accept that and are looking at it very carefully, but the NAO made a specific point. In some areas, it is absolutely brilliant that more people have the confidence to come forward to report crimes such as sexual abuse and domestic violence, which historically have not been reported as much as we would have liked and have probably not been treated as correctly as we would have wanted by police forces around the country. I think that most people would accept that.

Steve McCabe: The Policing Minister has said that achieving a fair funding formula is incredibly complex, and he has acknowledged that it is beyond the competence of his civil servants. The hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) has said that he is seeking fair funding, as are the rest of us. Given the difficulties, doubts and suspicions, will the Minister give a commitment that any future fair funding formula will be subject to proper independent scrutiny and analysis, so that we can all have confidence in it?
Mike Penning: I will come on to the report’s recommendations. Whether we use the organisations referred to by the Home Affairs Committee or others, it is crucial that we have the confidence to say, “This is where we are, this is what we think is right and the chief constables are with us.” I reiterate, however, that whenever the contents of a pot of gold are dispersed, there are winners and losers. At the end of the day, though, we must make sure that it is fairer.

Mr Kevan Jones: The Minister is right to raise the important issue of the pressures put on police forces by historic abuse cases. Durham faces a £2 million-plus bill for Operation Seabrook. Is it right that such a complex investigation, which is clearly needed, should fall on Durham? Should there not be a central pot to refund it for such operations?

Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Some forces have much larger percentage costs for historical cases and they have an opportunity to apply to the Home Office for assistance. It is right and proper that the investigations are done by the forces. Some investigations were not done correctly early on, which is even more reason why we should address them. I know about the inquiry referred to by the hon. Gentleman and I am more than happy to look into it. A piece of paper will probably be passed around my back while I am speaking, but I do not think I have had a request from Durham.

On the subject of Durham, it has done fantastically well, hasn’t it? If someone from the moon had landed here this afternoon and listened to this debate—some people probably wish they had travelled in the other direction—they would have thought that Durham had really struggled, so let us say from the outset that it has done fantastically well. It has even done really well in the latest independent reports on police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy. It has been rated outstanding on nine of the 12 points, good on another two, and the other one, which relates to a serious error on stop and search and the use of a Taser, requires improvement.

The force has done all that with a reduced workforce and a higher percentage of officers on the front line. It has experienced a substantial reduction in numbers, from 1,705 to 1,057, but it has massively reduced crime, including during this year. When the hon. Gentleman gets to his feet, I am sure that he will praise the police in Durham, as I have done.

Mr Jones: The Minister cannot have been listening to my speech, in which I praised the great leadership of the chief constable, Mike Barton, and the Labour PCC, Ron Hogg—and, more importantly, the men and women of Durham police. That is no reason why the force should not be fairly funded, however. It has done things well, but that has not been achieved easily. Clearly, it would not have got a fairer funding formula under the Government’s proposals.

Mike Penning: Durham has done more with less, and it has done so excellently. I agree with the hon. Gentleman completely, as I have said at the Dispatch Box on more than one occasion, that we need a way of funding our police that is fairer than the existing formula. He has said on more than one occasion today how difficult things have been for Durham. He is quite right to say so, and things have been difficult for other forces as well. I believe in giving praise where praise is due, and Durham has done fantastically well. It has reduced crime with fewer police but a higher percentage of officers on the front line than in 2010, and that is great.

Sarah Champion: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: I will not give way now, but I will do so in a minute. Most of the debate was not about the future funding formula; it was about the previous funding formula and previous austerity measures. There was a degree of concern—from, I accept, Members on both sides of the House—about how that was done and about how we should go forward.

Hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), have asked about the uplift in firearms capability. We have put £36 million out there, and there will be more to come. It is separately funded. Hon. Members have raised the issue of counter-terrorism, which is also funded separately from the formula.

I accept that in Bedfordshire, as the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) said, there are some real issues with the funding formula, and I have met him and other Bedfordshire Members to talk about that. There is more that could be done. Bedfordshire was given counter-terrorism money but did not manage to spend all of it. That is really interesting, in view of the fact that it was given the funding for that specific use. The percentage of warranted officers who are off duty because they are not fit for operational duties is 10%. That percentage is high for such a small force, and it is, understandably, a concern. I accept that there is work that we can do together.

Peter Dowd: Does the Minister acknowledge—that let us use that word—that given what happened with the review of the police funding formula and its withdrawal, there is deep concern that the same thing should not happen again and a fear that the formula will not be fair? That is the concern.

Mike Penning: Opposition Members can exacerbate that fear, but they cannot deny that I came to the House and ate an awful lot of humble pie because my officials got things wrong. As a Minister of State, I took responsibility for that, and we will go forward to make sure that we get it right. I repeat that there will be winners and losers; that is always going to be the case. Some people will be happier than others.

Mr Shuker: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: I give way to the hon. Member for Luton North—Luton South; my apologies.

Mr Shuker: We are only neighbours; it is fine. I accept that Bedfordshire, like all forces, will not be perfect in every respect, but does the Minister concede, on a point about which I have heard him speak before, that Bedfordshire does not have masses of reserves lying around that it can use to tackle problems? I have heard, for example, that only £7 million is unallocated in the four-year medium-term plan. To suggest that in some way—physician, heal thyself—we can fix it without fixing the funding formula would be unfair.
Mike Penning: I have not suggested that. I have said time and again at this Dispatch Box and to the PCC and the chief constable that Bedfordshire does need help. That is why I put the deep dive into Bedfordshire, as well as into Lincolnshire, to see exactly what was going on. Fantastic work has been done in collaboration with the other local forces. The capabilities review, which I will come on to, is crucial in ensuring that many of the forces get the sort of help they need.

Every time I stand at this Dispatch Box, I say how proud I am to be the Policing Minister for England and Wales, but I have never been prouder than I was yesterday at Didcot. We have all seen Didcot on our TV screens, but only when I went there did I understand the scale of the industrial incident—I use that word advisedly, because a police and Health and Safety Executive inquiry is still going on. Half the building has collapsed. Our thoughts and prayers are with those who are injured and the families of those who died. One family have had their loved one given back to them, but three of the bodies—I have to use that word, because we are in the recovery phase at the moment—are still underneath all the rubble. It will be some considerable time before it is safe to reclaim them so that their families can bury them and, understandably, grieve.

When I was at Didcot yesterday, I met some very young officers who arrived at the scene first. I can only imagine, even with the experiences I had in my different roles before I came to this House, what went through their minds. They went in one direction when lots of people were going in the other direction. There was a dust cloud, so at one stage they were not even sure where the incident was. There were lots of injured people and lots of people who needed help. The work that took place and the unbelievable teamwork that went on across the blue line during the incident was reported to me yesterday.

On behalf of the House and the country, I said thank you to every one of the emergency workers and personnel who were there, even down to the volunteer groups that came with tea and coffee. That happened literally within minutes because of the agreements that they had with the local police under the gold command. I said two things to them. I said that I was enormously proud, as Minister with responsibility for policing and fire issues, to be with them—there were also members of lots of other agencies—because they had done fantastically well. I also told them that what they saw on that afternoon would live with them for the rest of their lives. It was not physical injuries that I was talking about, but mental injuries.

We have touched on mental health today. The emergency services tend to be very macho, as do our armed forces, but post-traumatic stress can touch everybody—sometimes a couple of days later, sometimes a couple of years later and sometimes many years later. I have friends who served in the Falklands who have only started to suffer in the last couple of years. Our thoughts must be with those people.

A key thing that happened at Didcot—this is mentioned in the report—is that capabilities from other forces came to help. It was not just the traditional mutual aid that we saw in London a couple of weeks ago for the Syria conference, when armed response units came from all around the country, including from Northern Ireland—I was very proud to see the men and women in the green uniform on the streets of London. We must ask what we can learn from that. Are there lessons to be learned for our control rooms? There were lots of 999 calls. The police got the initial call, but there were also calls to the fire service, and there was a slight difference in terminology.

That shows why it is crucial in the funding review that we get the chiefs to tell us where their capabilities will sit. It looks quite simple initially: will they be in the force, whether it be Merseyside, Hertfordshire or the Met, in the regional organised crime units or at the National Crime Agency? Actually, it is much more complicated than that. As we touched on earlier, the forces have been doing work on joint capabilities for some considerable time. When we look at the new formula and at where the capabilities will be delivered from, it is crucial that we do not damage the work that has been done. We must not tell the forces to tear up the very close work that they have done and say, “You can’t do it there. It has to be done under the ROCU.” It is not for the Policing Minister to do that.

Alongside the funding review, the chief constables are coming forward with their own capabilities review. I cannot today give the House and the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee a timescale and date for the start of the new consultation, because I need that review to have reported to me. It would be ludicrous if I announced a new review and people said to me, “We will structure it this way” but then came back with another formula. I am not willing to do that.

Keith Vaz: The Minister has given us a pathway and timetable that we did not have before. Is he saying that as soon as the capabilities report comes to him, he will consider it and then start the funding review? Is that the timetable he is now setting in place?

Mike Penning: I am trying to be honest, as I always am when at the Dispatch Box or giving evidence to a Select Committee. Is this in my destiny today? Could I start a new consultation tomorrow? Yes I could, but I would not have the information within my grasp to do that. I have not got a date from Sara Thornton for that report. It is enormously difficult getting 43 police chiefs to agree where they will place their capabilities. For instance, East Midlands police covers homicide in the whole area, but most of the other ROCUs do not. Things such as cybercrime and encryption need to come with us because it should not be for the House or a Minister to tell chief constables “That’s what you should be doing”. The constables should be telling us where the capabilities will be, so that we can help with the funding formula.

Mr Gareth Thomas: The Minister will remember from the opening remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) that there has been speculation that the review will be put off until 2019. I appreciate the Minister cannot give a timetable, but can he categorically rule out it starting as late as that?

Mike Penning: No Minister would stand and give such categorical responses—I cannot, because that would be wrong. We are determined to ensure—the Met is crucial to this—that we have an understanding from the chiefs and the PCCs about where they are asking the
capabilities to be delivered from, whether ROCUs, local collaboration or the NCA. Then we can come forward and get it right.

I have a great deal of time for the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and her response was very measured, but when in government the Labour party said that it would implement this measure but it did not, and that is part of the discussion that we are having. Crime has massively changed since then.

Sarah Champion: The Minister is right to say that crime has massively changed. Does he share my concern that when we get data for online crime—fraud, grooming or abuse—the crime figures will spike?

Mike Penning: The National Audit Office suggested that that would be the case, and we have to accept that. That does not mean tomorrow morning, next week or next month when those figures are produced, that suddenly from that night on there is a 5 million or 6 million increase, or whatever the figure is, because it is happening to us all in our constituencies now. The difference is that we are going to publish it—the only way we can do this is to be honest about it and publish it. I do not know why previous Ministers did not publish that information in previous Administrations—believe it or not, I am not allowed to see those figures, because we are not allowed to do due diligence on what went on in previous Governments, and we are not allowed to see that guidance. I think it is because initially this issue was not taken seriously enough, and then people started to realise that it is actually a very difficult figure to pull together.

Richard Drax: I know from my constituency that Dorset is working with Devon and Cornwall, and other police forces are looking at how they run their blue-light services, including the ambulance service and fire brigade. Is the Minister saying that only when everyone has had a look at this issue in their various areas and come up with some joint policy that uses our resources and money better will he be able to say, “Okay, now we have various people doing different things. Now I will come up with some funding allocation”?

Mike Penning: I hope I did not say that because that is not what I intended to say. I intended to say that forces that have already collaborated should not be worse off by anything that we bring forward. The chiefs are doing their own capability review across policing—the collaboration with other services is a slightly different thing. Once I know where that delivery point will be and, in other words, where they think the services will be—they could be in ROCUs or local collaboration, as in my hon. Friend’s part of the country, or within the NCA, or within a force—we will have a basis for coming forward with a fairer formula.

Mr Kevan Jones: I want to ask a question about what the Minister is trying to achieve. If he is doing that now, why was it possible in the previous review to think that he could come up with a fair funding formula in eight weeks? What is the role of the Treasury? Is it still sitting on his shoulder trying to get savings, or are we starting with an entirely new process? One key thing that has been raised in the debate—I think the Minister realises it—is that he has to get the confidence back of chief constables, PCCs and the police family.

Mike Penning: I have broad shoulders, but they are not broad enough to take on the whole Treasury. However, the Treasury’s influence is only that it is a flat cash terms agreement for four years, not one year. That is the agreement we have. All the chiefs and PCCs know it. They did not know—they do now.

It would be wrong if I did not mention Scotland, not least because we heard a very interesting contribution from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and another one. I did not allow myself to get involved in the spat between the Labour party and the Scottish National party. All I can say is that I thought the SNP position was—I am almost lost for words—ridiculous. That is being polite. Suppose someone goes to their bank manager and asks for a loan of £10,000, £100,000 or even £1 million and he agrees it after looking at the business plan. If, as they walk out after presenting their business plan, they say to the bank manager who is giving them the money, “By the way, I want another 20%,” he will laugh. I laughed when I first read that that is exactly what the Scottish National party has done.

Richard Arkless: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: I will take an intervention in a minute, but we must try to understand that, if SNP Members put a business plan for a joint force in Scotland together and submit it, and accept that they are not going to get the 20%, how can they come to this House and bellyache?

Richard Arkless: I would make two points. First, when that person walks out of that bank and finds out that every single competitor on the street has better terms, it starts to rankle and they protest about it. Secondly, when we included that in our business plan, we made our protestations clear. We told the Government that we did not think it was right. We reserved the right to campaign on it for ever and a day. That is what we will do. The fact that it is agreed and in the plan does not make it right.

Mike Penning: If someone signs a contract and has an agreement, they are tied into it. At the end of the day, they can protest as much as they want, but at the end of the day, they signed a contract that said, “No VAT”. They are now in that position where there is no VAT. I am not going to give way.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a disorderly way of proceeding. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) must not chunter from a sedentary position in hopeful anticipation of the Minister giving way. What he does is signal. If the Minister gives way, he can intervene.

Mike Penning: I am coming to a conclusion, not least because we debated this matter last week and two weeks before that. I have no idea why the Labour party called
a debate last week, which has meant that fewer Members are in the Chamber today to debate the Select Committee’s report.

At the end of the day, all hon. Members want confidence that our police are there. They are there. We need to have confidence that crime is dropping. It is dropping. We need a different formula and we will try to provide one. I am sorry that I cannot give the Chair of the Committee the dates of each individual part, but I think he will understand why I want to get this absolutely spot on and right, which is why I have given the responses I have given today. It has been a sensible debate, even if I have not agreed with everything I have heard from Labour Members.

6.44 pm

Keith Vaz: This has been an excellent debate, with so many right hon. and hon. Members talking about their local areas. The passion and respect we have in this House for our local police force is quite obvious. I want to add my thanks to Simon Cole, the chief constable of Leicestershire, and to the men and women of Leicestershire police, especially with an hour to go until the next time they will be at the King Power stadium protecting the best football team in England—with apologies to what happened to your own team, Mr Speaker. It is just one example of wonderful policing work.

Mike Penning: I know that as an Arsenal supporter, you, Mr Speaker, will find it somewhat difficult to be listening to a Leicester supporter, especially after the weekend, but the right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The policing of football grounds has changed massively. It is done completely differently. Thank goodness the sort of violence we used to see when I was younger is no longer there.

Keith Vaz: Indeed, Mr Speaker, as we prepare, with the grace of God, for European football next year.

The key question the Select Committee wanted the Minister to answer was when? He has not told us when, but he has given us a timetable. He is waiting for the capabilities report to come from the lead at the NPCC Chief Constables’ Council. When he gets that he will review it and then start the process. At least we have a timetable and a pathway, so there is some clarity. It is not the absolute clarity we needed, but it is some way forward to find out how we will get a police funding formula that is fit for purpose.

Question deferred until tomorrow at Seven o’clock (Standing Order No. 54).

Business without Debate

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House we will take together the motions relating to social security.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

SOCIAL SECURITY

That the Employment Allowance (Increase of Maximum Amount) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 63), dated 25 January 2016, a copy of which was laid before this House on 25 January, be approved.

That the Employment Allowance (Excluded Companies) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 January, be approved.

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Limits and Thresholds Amendments and National Insurance Fund Payments) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 January, be approved. —(Stephen Barclay.)

Question agreed to.

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

ECCLESIASTICAL LAW

That the draft Grants to the Churches Conservation Trust Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 13 January, be approved.—(Stephen Barclay.)

Question agreed to.
Bombardier: Job Losses (East Belfast)

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

6.47 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I first express my gratitude for the selection of this Adjournment debate, and the opportunity to raise what for me and my constituency has been a devastating blow not just for us in east Belfast, but for the Northern Ireland economy and for constituents in Derby affected by cuts in the transport division and internationally across Bombardier’s operation? Given the nature of Adjournment debates, I trust that hon. Members will have no objection to the parochial title I chose for this debate. My desire is to do the best for my constituents in east Belfast, while recognising that this story is much larger.

Bombardier employs 74,000 people in 28 countries across the world, with 7% or roughly 5,500 employees in Belfast working directly in the aerospace industry. On 17 February, it announced 1,080 job losses in east Belfast.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My hon. Friend talks about the figure of 1,080 jobs lost. Some 1,000 people work for Bombardier in my constituency. With great respect, our concern is not just east Belfast but Strangford. I commend him for bringing this issue to the House for consideration and for his hard work with the Minister. Help will have to reach beyond east Belfast, as there will be job losses for my constituents as well.

Gavin Robinson: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. He is right. Some 5,500 people are employed in the east Belfast site and around the city in five other locations. People work for Bombardier in my constituency. With great respect, our concern is not just east Belfast but Strangford. I commend him for bringing this issue to the House for consideration and for his hard work with the Minister. Help will have to reach beyond east Belfast, as there will be job losses for my constituents as well.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am grateful for the opportunity to intervene in this very important debate. The hon. Gentleman will be well aware that his party leader, the now First Minister Arlene Foster, will make her first visit in that capacity to America shortly, accompanied by the Deputy First Minister, to mark St Patrick’s day. Has the hon. Gentleman asked the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to encourage the American Government, which have done so much to support the peace process and other events in Northern Ireland, to intervene on this particular occasion?

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Lady who raises a fair point. When I was the special adviser to the then First Minister, I had the opportunity alongside him and the Deputy First Minister of visiting Montreal and the Bombardier facility there in 2012. There are important strategic links that have grown with the United States of America, so I think it is an important avenue to pursue.

With Bombardier being the largest private employer in Northern Ireland, providing high-skilled, well-paid jobs in a technically advanced industry, the impact is of great significance. The aerospace industry in Northern Ireland contributes £1.1 billion to our local economy, and to put that into perspective, that is 10% of our overall operating budget of the Northern Ireland Executive. Bombardier is also responsible for 10% of Northern Ireland’s total export manufacturing figures. Our region’s Enterprise Minister, Jonathan Bell, MLA, my colleague on the Northern Ireland Executive has the realistic and positive ambition of growing the impact that the aerospace industry in Northern Ireland has from £1.1 billion to £2 billion by 2024.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about being parochial, but of course with the launch of the C Series by Bombardier, the factory has a huge contribution to make to the UK aerospace sector as a whole. I understand his concern for his own constituency and region, but does he recognise that this is a national problem, as well as a local one?

Gavin Robinson: I completely agree. In fact, I was seeking hon. Members’ forgiveness for the parochial nature of the title of the debate, recognising that the issue is much larger than East Belfast and Northern Ireland. In view of the nature of aviation, this is a UK and a global story.

I was saying that our Executive have a positive target of reaching £2 billion by 2024, but to achieve that aim, after the announcements over the last two weeks, it is important for us to take stock at this stage and to establish how best to grow to reach that target.

Bombardier’s present difficulties are directly associated with their noble development of the C Series aircraft. I say “noble”, because it is exactly the sort of manufacturing that we as a country should support. The C Series aircraft is novel; it is highly innovative; it utilises the best advances in lightweight composite technology; and in its class, it represents the next generation of light, noise-reducing, fuel-efficient aircraft that will travel further for less, with the wings that are fabricated and assembled in my constituency of East Belfast.

Such innovation has brought with it significant pressure from competitors in both Boeing and Airbus. The project has taken three years longer than anticipated and at $5.4 billion, it is $2 billion over budget. Cash flow has become a problem, but if I may, I wish to nail a number of myths that should not go unchallenged.

First, Bombardier is not a busted flush. It has taken a bold but significant step to refocus its operation and to enhance its competitiveness, and the rise in company value is just one indication that, while deeply painful, the recalibration of its international operation was an important step.

Secondly, the Government could not have done more to stave off the job losses. Bombardier has said as much, with half the job losses announced being in Canada, just four months after the Quebec Government invested over 1 billion Canadian dollars in the company.

There was nothing that the regional government or national Government could have done in the last few weeks to stave off the difficult announcement that was made.
Indeed, far from viewing our Government as being inactive, I have been hugely encouraged by the support offered by both regional and national Government, so it may be appropriate to place on record at this stage my sincere appreciation for the commitment given by the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise. She recognises the importance of Bombardier to the Northern Ireland economy. Within hours of the announcement during recess week, she was available to discuss the issue with me by phone and she stood ready to assist. Just yesterday morning, she flew to Belfast, toured the facility and met management to extend her support, alongside the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. As you know, Mr Speaker, the Minister was here until late last night, and it was an early start for her yesterday, but she was committed, and she responded most ably.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I echo and endorse much of what my colleague from the neighbouring constituency has been saying. Many of the job losses are not in any one constituency: they are widely scattered. Is there not a need for all of us here, and the Northern Ireland Executive and the United Kingdom Government, to work together? Northern Ireland needs a comprehensive strategy, and that is not down to the Northern Ireland Executive alone.

Gavin Robinson: I am grateful for the intervention from my parliamentary neighbour, some of whose constituents work at the Bombardier plant.

To date, the support of regional and national Government for Bombardier has reaped real rewards. Since the privatisation of Short Brothers in 1989, £2.6 billion has been invested in its facilities. Most recently, £114 million from regional and national Government secured an additional £850 million investment from Bombardier itself, including £520 million for the wing facility in my constituency, which was opened by the Prime Minister and was visited by the Minister yesterday.

But here’s the ask. In view of the Minister’s support, I ask her to leave no stone unturned in considering how we can best support Bombardier, especially given the investment that has been present for the C Series. I am also keen for UK Trade & Investment to take a more imaginative approach when considering how it can best support various aircraft manufacturers when they seek to secure orders internationally. Competition is rife in this market, but with three competing firms seeking support, alongside the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)—my new friend—on securing the debate, I hope that my other friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), will forgive me: I have a new friend in Northern Ireland now.

This is a very important matter, and I do not seek to make light of it. Let me now take the opportunity to express my deep regret that Bombardier recently announced plans to reduce its workforce by—as we have heard—more than 1,000 jobs in Northern Ireland, and by 270 at its works in Derby. This is obviously a very worrying time for all the workers and, of course, for their families. The impact of the decision will be felt not just in the hon. Member for Strangford’s constituency, but in other communities in other constituencies.

Yesterday I visited Bombardier Aerostructures and Engineering Services in Northern Ireland to discuss the recent announcement and how we can do even more to support them.

7 pm

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Anna Soubry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Now I can really get stuck into what I want to say. I was waiting for that moment.

I visited Bombardier yesterday with my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East and the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace). I make no apologies for singing the praises not only of Bombardier but of the huge, fabulous building in which it makes the wings and of the highly skilled, dedicated workforce.

It was an absolute joy and pleasure to meet not just the management but the workforce and to see how they work with what I was about to describe as pieces of fabric. I do not want anyone to think that the wings are made out of fabric. Those composites are laid, piece upon piece, and the shape emerges. The wings are beautifully constructed. Resin is applied and they are baked and worked on. It really was the most wonderful experience to see an aeroplane wing being constructed. Those huge pieces of equipment are so important to every aeroplane. It was wonderful to see them grow...
from strips of carbon fibre into the finished product, which is then put on a ship, after which there is nothing more to be done except join them to the fuselage. The entire construction is created in Belfast, and it was a wonderful experience that I will not forget. It was a great day, but in very difficult and concerning times.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East has made clear, Bombardier does not ask any more of us. It has made it clear that we have done everything we can, and that includes the Northern Ireland Government. The workforce need support. For employees in Northern Ireland, where economic development, education, employment and training are devolved matters, the UK Government have supported the Northern Ireland aerospace sector and will of course continue to do so. The Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland and Invest Northern Ireland will offer support to those affected by this announcement with a redundancy support package and possible retraining. As we know, there are potentially two tranches of people who are going to be made redundant, and that support will in some ways at least ease the burden on them and on Belfast and its surrounding areas.

In the immediate term, to assist those workers affected by Bombardier’s decision, the industry-led talent retention solution is available across the UK, including in Northern Ireland. The programme is designed to help any skilled Bombardier employees who lose their jobs to secure re-employment quickly within the advanced manufacturing and engineering sectors. As we know, these are highly skilled workers.

Bombardier has said that there is nothing the Government can do to reverse its restructuring decision, because that decision unfortunately reflects the firm’s order book, but we will of course continue to work closely with it. Bombardier is a major contributor to the UK economy. That is why we will continue to explore ways to support its drive for greater competitiveness, building on the success of the supply chains for the 21st century programme.

Bombardier plays a leading role in the work of the aerospace growth partnership—the AGP—which brings industry together with the Government to tackle barriers to growth, to boost exports and to secure high-value jobs for the long term. This spans work on technology, supply-chain productivity, competitiveness and skills. The AGP published a UK-wide strategy in March 2013 which is being implemented in Northern Ireland through a strategy launched in 2014 by the Northern Ireland Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We will continue to work closely together on this.

In March 2013, the Government and industry committed £2.1 billion for new aerospace research and development to help to ensure that the UK could develop the product and manufacturing processes needed to position the sector for long-term growth. The 2015 spending review protected and extended this funding by an additional £900 million over six years to 2025-26, which the industry has committed to match. Therefore, the total joint commitment is now £3.9 billion for aerospace research from 2013 to 2026. Bombardier has committed to receive £9.5 million for six projects looking into engine nacelle—engine housing—and wing technology, which of course it does so brilliantly.

**Anna Soubry:** The hon. Lady snuck India in there as well, so she gives me a number of points to answer. I can tell her that this Government absolutely recognise the huge importance of the aerospace sector, which is why we put it as much money as we have, matched of course by the sector itself. It is important that we understand how vital it is that we continue to trade with China, but we are also hugely alert to the fact that China is slowly beginning to develop its own aerospace industry. In the past, it has bought its aeroplanes from other countries, but it is no great surprise that the Chinese are looking to the great success of our aerospace industry. The fear is that they will seek to replicate it—I shall put it in that way. The hon. Lady can be assured that we will always make it clear that United Kingdom industry, especially manufacturing, is incredibly important to the success of this Government, because it is so important to the success of our economy. If we do not have a good economy, if we do not have a manufacturing success, we need to make sure we have the sort of services we need. Let us be in no doubt that aerospace is incredibly important to us, which, as I say, is why we have done the work and made the investment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East made a good point about UKTI, and we will continue to promote Northern Ireland in all the work we do in promoting the United Kingdom. We will work to support the company’s export campaigns, and UK Export Finance also stands ready to support C Series aircraft sales. He will remember that we specifically talked about whether or not we could do some more work in making the point that the wings had been made in the United Kingdom, in Belfast. We should seize upon that, use that great technology and the huge respect those wings rightly have, and do—I was going to say a much better job, but I would rightly be reprimanded for that—some real work on making the point that they are made in Belfast. There is some more work we can do there with UKTI, and I am committed to taking that up.

While we are on the C Series passenger jet programme, let me say that it is a beautiful aircraft. I was given a model of one, although I almost did not need one because we can see that it is such a lovely aircraft. The company reaffirmed its commitment to the C Series passenger jet programme and Belfast’s critical role in its delivery. As we know, on 17 February Air Canada signed a letter of intent for up to 75 C Series aircraft, which is a positive development for the programme. Along with the Northern Ireland Executive, we are fully committed to Bombardier’s C Series aircraft programme. We have jointly supported the C Series aircraft development by committing £113.37 million of repayable launch investment, and we stand ready to provide export promotion and finance to support it. We will continue to work with
Bombardier to support its sales campaigns, and, as I say, there is an awful lot more we can do by way of UKTI to take full advantage of this.

Jim Shannon: This is a very difficult subject to consider. One of the unfortunate casualties of the lay-offs is the apprenticeship scheme. I understand that the scheme will probably be cancelled because of the job losses. With that in mind, has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to look at other opportunities? Perhaps there could be help for those apprentices who have done some time already and would like to do more. I accept that it is not the Minister's responsibility, but will she consider taking a look at that matter?

Anna Soubry: I am really very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I do not think I knew that, and it concerns me hugely, as I am sure it will concern everybody on the Opposition Benches. There is something particularly cruel about an apprentice losing their job, especially as we know that these are highly skilled jobs. I am more than happy to take that matter away. As the hon. Gentleman will see, I have three people sitting in the Box taking notes, so we will definitely take that away, and if there is anything I can do to help, I absolutely will do it.

Lady Hermon: There is something that the Minister can do. The Enterprise Bill comes back to the House next week. There is a clause in that Bill on apprenticeships, which was wrongly designated as exclusively English. When the Minister of State was winding up on Second Reading, he said that there would be a national advertising campaign for the apprenticeships that were mentioned in the Bill, but Northern Ireland was excluded. The Minister should look at that clause and ensure that it is altered before it goes through its final stages next week.

Anna Soubry: I certainly undertake to take a look at it, but I am not promising to be able to alter it. None the less, I will take away this apprenticeship query. I am sure that the Northern Ireland Executive and Bombardier will be well onto this matter, but if there is anything more that we can do, we will try to do it. The thought of youngsters finding their apprenticeships cut short concerns us all, so I absolutely give that undertaking.

As I come to a close, may I address some of the specific points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)? Bombardier is the sort of aircraft that is perfectly placed to provide that service to passengers. It may be that that is a very good set of arguments to be advanced, but, as I have said, I cannot possibly comment on it.

In relation to the meeting with the Minister for Defence Procurement, we will absolutely get that together. We are in the process of bringing everybody into the Ministry of Defence. We will not come to Northern Ireland, much as we want to, as we think we stand a better chance of getting everybody around the table if we hold the meeting in the MOD. We are definitely working on that. It will take a bit of time to get all the big players, and the right players, around that table, but that is an absolute promise that I have made. My hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement is also keen to have that meeting; we are looking forward to it and we think we can do some good work there.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell: Will the Minister accept the point I made earlier to my colleague the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)? Bombardier is the subject of this evening’s debate, and it is very important that we focus on it and do not detract from its importance, but the Northern Ireland economy is frail and fragile. Ministers in the Executive have done a wonderful job trying to promote the economy in every way possible, but we need a comprehensive plan including having her good self and her Department, as well as the broader UK Government, give us that bit of extra help. To put it quite simply, the likes of the apprenticeship provision are very important because we are not in a position to give our young people jobs. If the Minister is coming to visit, we will find places other than North Antrim to take her. I am a native of North Antrim, but there are 17 other constituencies and we would love to involve the Minister in helping us to build a more prosperous society.

Anna Soubry: I am more than happy to work with anyone, but I get the invitations and either say yes or no, so the hon. Gentleman will have to invite me. When people ask me to go to places, I am happy to go. There are places I am particularly keen to go, and it just so happens that Northern Ireland is one. I went over to meet the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and had a very pleasant day with him. I have to say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that he said he would only take up my time for a couple of hours—four hours later I had nearly missed the plane.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Don’t worry, it happens to us all.

Anna Soubry: It is a great place. As for plans, I do not think that that is for me to say, but I am always happy to work with anybody and assist in any way I can. I know how important it is that we get the employment rate to where it should be in Northern Ireland, especially for the young people. When I went over there last year, one thing that everybody spoke to me about was the need to
ensure that there was a real and genuine future for young people. That is why we get so worried about Bombardier: we know that it offers high-quality jobs involving real money and real skills, so it is imperative that we keep those high-value, highly skilled jobs in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, I am sure that the House will join me in regretting the announcement of the job losses, but we are committed and determined to do all we can to support Bombardier in its future, to make it even more competitive and to support the C Series as much as we can for all the reasons I have explained, which are, if I may say so, obvious.

Question put and agreed to.

7.18 pm
House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Exports

1. Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive on increasing the level of exports from Northern Ireland. [903780]

Mr Wallace: The Secretary of State and I hold regular discussions with Executive Ministers on a range of issues impacting the Northern Ireland economy. I welcome the recent visits to Northern Ireland by the Prime Minister, the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise and the Mayor of London to see at first hand the businesses and people who make the country's strong export record a reality.

Chris White: I welcome the Government's ambition to increase the number of companies in the UK that export by 100,000 by 2020. What steps are being taken, alongside the Executive, to ensure that Northern Ireland plays a major role in achieving that target?

Mr Wallace: As a consequence of both the Northern Ireland Executive's efforts and this Government's long-term economic plan, I am delighted to report that Northern Ireland’s exports have grown 4% over the year—higher than those of any other country in the United Kingdom.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State will be aware that the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland employs about 100,000 people. Will she assure us that she will work alongside Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to try to find new markets, which are essential to the agri-food sector, such as India, Mexico and Brazil?

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of the agri-food business. Indeed, on Monday night my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I met Moy foods, one of the biggest employers in Northern Ireland. New markets around the world are key to growing the agri-food business, not only in the EU but in China and elsewhere. That is why I am delighted that in May the GREAT campaign to promote Britain and United Kingdom exports will be visiting Northern Ireland.

I look forward to working with the Northern Ireland Executive to help that promotion to go from strength to strength.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State commit to commissioning research into the possible effects of leaving the EU on Northern Ireland’s exports and wider economy? Will she further commit to making a statement to the House on the economic effects on Northern Ireland of a UK withdrawal from the EU thereafter?

Mr Wallace: The Government are very clear that being in the EU makes us better off, stronger and safer. I do not think that we will be diverted by commissioning external reports about what may or may not happen. The United Kingdom knows exactly what being in the EU looks like, because we are in it now. The reforms that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has got will achieve that goal.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Earlier this week, a Cabinet Office report was published that stated that leaving the EU would result in the imposition of customs checks at the Irish border. Do the Minister and the Secretary of State accept the assessment of the Cabinet Office? What impact do the Government expect customs checks to have on Northern Irish exports to the south—and this is being positive?

Mr Wallace: Of course, as a member of the Government, I accept the Cabinet Office's views. We should not forget that Ireland and the United Kingdom have a long-standing agreement, the common travel area, which would mean that certain barriers would not be in place. However, should we leave the European Union, we will be outside the customs union, and that will inevitably lead to some form of extra barriers to trade.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I do not know how the Minister keeps a straight face in some of his answers. It is no wonder that the Secretary of State is again avoiding answering these questions on the economy. Has the Minister discussed with Executive Ministers the survey by the Northern Ireland chamber of commerce, which showed that 81% of businesses in Northern Ireland support continued EU membership? Is it the case that there is little surprise in that finding, given that 60% of Northern Ireland's exports—a higher percentage than in any other part of the UK—go to the EU?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I discussed that with the Northern Ireland chamber of commerce at a reception on Monday night in Northern Ireland. If the hon. Gentleman wants to know how I keep a straight face, let me tell him that I look across the Dispatch Box at two Labour Members who are in favour of replacing Trident, and I remember that their leader has no intention whatsoever of using it or replacing it. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: I do not think that that is germane to the matter of exports from Northern Ireland.

Vernon Coaker: We are all amazed by the Minister’s response. That really was going to the bottom of the barrel to try to find something to say.
Building on the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), has the Minister discussed with Ministers in the Executive the fact that more than a third of exports to the EU—well over £1 billion a year—go to the Republic? She referred to a report. The Government report was published today, and her remarks are supported by the Newry chamber of commerce. There are very real concerns about customs checks having to be put in place at the border, because that would be a border between the UK and the EU. I discussed that last night in Belfast with Nigel Farage. We had a big debate about it. Let me say to the Minister that it deserves a better answer than, “It’ll be all right on the night.”

Mr Wallace: I think I would rather have seen Adele last night, who is playing in Belfast, than Nigel Farage.

The United Kingdom Government believe that we are better off, stronger and safer if we stay in the EU. Of course we do not want barriers to further trade. We recognise the importance of trade across the border to the Republic of Ireland. I can say that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I are absolutely united in making sure that Northern Ireland business prospers and does the best it can, because this Government’s long-term economic plan will ensure that exports and domestic trade flourish.

Organised Crime

2. Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle organised crime in Northern Ireland. [903781]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): The UK Government are supporting the fight against organised crime through the police funding delivered through the Northern Ireland block grant, the £25 million to tackle paramilitarism due to be provided under the fresh start agreement, and the work of bodies such as the National Crime Agency and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. The £160 million of additional security funding will support efforts on organised crime because of the involvement of terrorist groupings in that form of criminality.

Tom Tugendhat: In the fresh start agreement, the Executive committed to undertake a public awareness campaign to increase public understanding of the harm done to all communities by paramilitarism and organised crime. Given the impact that that has on businesses, will my right hon. Friend encourage the Executive to proceed quickly down that path?

Mrs Villiers: A theme that came out strongly from the fresh start talks was the need for a whole community approach to tackling the problems of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland in order not only to continue the excellent work of the police and their security partners, but to ensure that the public are well aware of the harm done by organised crime and are supported in their efforts to give the evidence necessary to bring individuals to justice and put them in prison, where they deserve to be.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Since the National Crime Agency has, at long last, become operational in Northern Ireland, what efforts have been made to seize the assets of those involved in organised crime and reinvest them in community projects in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Villiers: The NCA takes its duty to seize criminal assets very seriously. In that work, it will be assisted by the new joint agency taskforce on cross-jurisdictional crime, which will be established from April. It will consist not only of the NCA, Border Force, the immigration service and HMRC, but of the Irish Revenue Commissioners and the Criminal Assets Bureau. That will significantly enhance the excellent efforts already being made in Northern Ireland on these matters under the Organised Crime Task Force.

Organised Crime

3. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What discussions she has had with Ministers of the Irish Government on cross-border efforts to tackle organised crime.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): In December, I attended a trilateral cross-border ministerial meeting with the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government. We agreed new measures to enhance law enforcement co-operation. A joint agency task force to tackle cross-jurisdictional organised crime has been created in line with the fresh start agreement.

Sir David Amess: While accepting that there are political uncertainties in the south as a result of the elections, does my right hon. Friend agree that the north and south face similar difficulties in combating
crime, managing offenders and supporting victims, and that it is in everyone's best interests that the Administrations of the north and south work closely together?

Mrs Villiers: I agree entirely. Security co-operation between the UK and Ireland is better than it ever has been. I believe that it is saving lives every day in the fight against organised crime and terrorism.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a stain on our efforts to frustrate cross-border crime that, after decades of fundraising for and running the Provisional IRA, it took the Irish Republic to secure an Al Capone-style conviction on Thomas “Slab” Murphy. Does that not highlight the fact that much more needs to be done to frustrate not only those who proliferate across the border, but those who support and fundraise for ongoing terror in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Villiers: The work that has been done by the Organised Crime Task Force and the PSNI over recent years in Northern Ireland is exceptional and very effective. I am convinced that the new strategy for paramilitaries in the fresh start agreement, in which the political parties went further than ever before in condemning paramilitary activity in the most forthright terms, and the cross-jurisdictional arrangements that were set up in the agreement will make Northern Ireland an even safer place than it is today.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is a clear indication that the economic pact is working?

Mrs Villiers: The economic pact that was signed between the Executive and the Government means that we are working more closely than ever before to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy and boost jobs. Unemployment is down by more than 40% from its peak in February 2013 and progress is being made towards implementing the devolution of corporation tax, which shows that working together between our two Administrations is effective in delivering for Northern Ireland.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome the very good news on the economy in Northern Ireland, but in the light of the recent job losses in the manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland, with companies identifying high energy costs as one of the impediments to manufacturing growth, will the Secretary of State say what she is doing, along with the Executive, to tackle that issue?

Mrs Villiers: I have discussed that matter with the Executive and companies such as Michelin on many occasions, and I appreciate their concerns. It is also right to acknowledge the grave concern that people affected by redundancies at Bombardier will have. It is important to acknowledge that Bombardier is clear that that was part of a global restructuring, and that there was nothing that the Government or the Executive could have done to change its decision. However, it is also worth noting that manufacturing in Northern Ireland is strong and growing.

Mr Dodds: For our part, as leaders in the Northern Ireland Executive, we will continue to drive forward economic growth in conjunction with the Government here. Tourism is a major and important factor in driving that growth, and the Executive have invested heavily in, for example, Titanic Belfast and bringing major events to Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State help us by reducing VAT on tourism and air passenger duty? That would really drive forward our region economically.

Mrs Villiers: The right hon. Gentleman will, of course, know that EU law constrains us from reducing VAT on those matters. However, I am committed to doing all I can to bring more tourists to Northern Ireland, which is a fabulous place to visit. In particular, the Executive’s investment in Titanic Belfast has been an outstanding success.
13. [903794] Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the Secretary of State for her answers so far. However, although she can speak eloquently, and we are all very pleased about the economic development that has taken place, does she agree about the need to work more closely with Northern Ireland MPs and the Executive to establish a much more robust economic strategy to regenerate the economy and stimulate job creation, rather than a series of disconnected policies?

Mrs Villiers: Closer working between Ministers and MPs is always desirable. The economic pact gives us a strong platform for doing that. We have brought the economic pact implementation into line with the process for implementing the fresh start and Stormont House agreements, and that gives even more scope for working closely with the hon. Gentleman’s party and others to ensure that the Northern Ireland economy thrives into the future.

Executive: Sustainable Finances

5. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that the Northern Ireland Executive’s financial position is sustainable. [903784]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): The Stormont House and fresh start agreements set out a number of measures to assist with the sustainability of the Executive’s finances. These include packages of financial support of around £2.5 billion, implementation of welfare reform, and measures to improve the efficiency of the public sector.

Stephen Timms: Does the Secretary of State accept that there is a major threat to the sustainability of the Executive’s finances if her view prevails and the UK leaves the European Union?

Mrs Villiers: My colleague the Minister has stated the Government’s position on those matters. The Northern Ireland Executive’s finances are on a more stable footing than they have been for many years. As a result of the fresh start talks, we have settled a budget crisis that was threatening to collapse the institutions. The Labour party should support us in maintaining that financial sustainability.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact on Northern Ireland’s financial position of leaving the European Union? What assessment have her civil servants made of it, and is she allowed to see it?

Mrs Villiers: The Government are publishing several documents setting out their position on the European Union. As I have said, we should welcome the dedicated work of the UK Government and the Northern Ireland political parties to settle a budget crisis that was threatening to collapse the institutions and a return to direct rule, which would have been a major setback.

Mr Speaker: The question was supposed to be about the financial position of the Northern Ireland Executive. The hon. Gentleman is, as he knows, a very cheeky chappie.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Federation of Small Businesses indicates that some 32,000 jobs will be created by the corporation tax provisions, which the fresh start agreement secured. Sixty per cent. of those jobs in Northern Ireland are in the small and medium-sized business sector. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that small and medium-sized businesses benefit from the corporation tax reduction?

Mrs Villiers: I have had many discussions over the years with the Executive and Invest NI on those matters. We believe that the devolution of corporation tax could have a hugely positive impact on the Northern Ireland economy, including for small businesses.

Mr Speaker: I call Roger Mullin.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I declare an interest as a former consultant to a range of educational initiatives across all communities—

Mr Speaker: You start with “Question No. 6”, man.

Disadvantaged Children

6. Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What discussions she has had with Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive on programmes to support the most disadvantaged children in Northern Ireland. [R] [903785]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): This Government are committed to improving the life chances of disadvantaged children by addressing worklessness and improving educational attainment. These are largely devolved issues in Northern Ireland, where the Executive have the powers to address child poverty in areas such as health, education, housing and childcare.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman does not need to declare his interest in the context of a question. In any case he has already done so, so he can bang on with his question.

Roger Mullin: Is the Minister aware of the Shankill children and young people’s zone in Belfast, a programme embedded in the community that aims to address generational disadvantage in the area? Is the Minister willing to meet the zone organisers and share the lessons being learned more widely?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I am aware of that organisation. I was on the Shankill yesterday visiting two business parks, the Argyle business centre and Duncairn Gardens, in that very sensitive part of north Belfast. I would be delighted to meet them, and if the hon. Gentleman wants to come along too, he would be welcome.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Does the Minister accept that the changes to the welfare system will mean even more disadvantaged children in Northern Ireland?

Mr Wallace: No, I do not accept that. The changes to the welfare system have proved that what we should do is make work pay. It is having a positive effect, as we
see an increase in employment in Northern Ireland. More people and families are going out and securing a wage. That is the best way to lift people out of poverty.

**Terrorism**

7. Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the security services in tackling terrorism in Northern Ireland. [903787]

8. Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the security services in tackling terrorism in Northern Ireland. [903791]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): Keeping people safe from terrorism is one of the Government’s highest priorities. The PSNI and its security partners have our fullest support. Funding for the intelligence services will increase significantly over the course of this spending review. The PSNI will also receive an additional £160 million to combat the security threat. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House we are discussing serious matters and I hope Dr Offord will be heard.

Dr Offord: I welcome the new commitment to a pledge of office, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the passive acceptance of values is not sufficient, and that there must be an active fulfilment of them?

Mrs Villiers: I agree that both the pledge of office and the fresh start agreement itself will be judged on implementation. Experience in Northern Ireland says that making a declaration or getting an agreement is only part of the journey. We are determined to see the fresh start agreement implemented in full. Implementation is going well, not least with the establishment of the panel to set out the strategy against paramilitarism.

Michael Ellis: Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to recognise the tireless work of the PSNI and MI5, whose efforts continue to ensure that the vast majority of the people of the Province of Northern Ireland remain unaffected by dissident threats?

Mrs Villiers: I can certainly do that. They have our fullest support, as set out in the Conservative manifesto for Northern Ireland. Their courage and dedication is saving lives in Northern Ireland on a daily basis. They remain one of the main targets for attacks by dissident republican groupings, but they put their own safety on the line to defend the whole of the community.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): If, as the Secretary of State wants, we withdraw from the European Union, what assessment does she think the PSNI will make of the loss of the use of the European arrest warrant?

Mrs Villiers: The Government’s position on these matters is clear and has been set out in a number of documents published in recent days. What we are all agreed on is the essential nature of the co-operation on security matters between the UK and Ireland, and the crucial importance of that continuing, whatever the result of the referendum.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State do what she can to unite the community in support of the police against terror? Does she agree that that job would be made much easier if senior police officers, who this week took a decision to relocate memorials to murdered colleagues away from public-facing positions in police stations into back offices, reconsider that decision and relocate them, and ensure that the campaign against terror gets support right across the community?

Mrs Villiers: I will certainly reflect on the hon. Gentleman’s point about the location of police memorials, but it is crucial to build support for the PSNI across the community. Support is at one of its highest ever levels and I welcome that fact.

**Economy**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Ben Wallace): The Government remain committed to working with the Executive and rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy. The Government’s long-term economic plan is working and delivering for Northern Ireland: the economy is growing; there are 46,000 more people in employment than in 2010; and wages are up more than 5%.

Paula Sherriff: The Government recently set up an independent National Infrastructure Commission to ensure a long-term view on key infrastructure projects. What work is the Minister doing to ensure that the infrastructure commission is of benefit to the Northern Ireland economy, and can he name some specific infrastructure projects that it will undertake?

Mr Wallace: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has been in touch with Andrew Adonis to ensure that the commission is UK-wide. I am also delighted that, because of the efforts of the Government and the Northern Ireland parties through the fresh start agreement, the Northern Ireland Executive are well on their way to investing in new infrastructure for Northern Ireland, including hopefully work on the A5, the M2, and the A6 up to Derry, and Northern Ireland will get a 21st century road network that will improve economic development.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 2 March.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others,
and in addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

**Patricia Gibson:** Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to confirm that the UK Government intended to take £7 billion from Scotland over a decade through the fiscal framework? Will he take this opportunity today to explain why that was the case?

**The Prime Minister:** Only the SNP could try to maintain a grievance after a settlement has been put in place. We have built a powerhouse Parliament for Scotland that will have more powers, more ability to set tax rates, more ability to determine benefits for its citizens. Now it is time for the SNP to stop talking about grievances and get on with government.

Q2. [903841] **Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): The Csa Group in my constituency has recently taken on six new apprentices, and across South Ribble we have had more than 1,000 apprenticeship starts since 2014. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this suggests that the Government should stick with their plans so that even more companies have the opportunity to take on apprentices?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have this very stretching target for 3 million apprentices to be trained during this Parliament. We will do our bit by funding those programmes. We want business to do its part by contributing to the apprenticeship levy, but we need small businesses such as Csa in my hon. Friend’s constituency and, indeed, the public sector to get fully involved in training apprentices to give young people the chance to earn and learn at the same time.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Lab): It is three years since the Government announced a policy of tax-free childcare. Can the Prime Minister tell us what the hold-up is?

**The Prime Minister:** We are introducing the tax-free childcare, along with the 30 hours of childcare, for everyone with three and four-year-olds, with a £6 billion commitment. The start of the 30 hours will come in through a pilot scheme this year.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The Treasury website describes it as a “long-term plan”. Well, it is certainly that, because it was announced in 2013 and is apparently not going to be introduced until next year. Why is the Prime Minister’s promise of 30 hours free childcare for three and four-year-olds not available for one in three working parents who want their children to be cared for in a pre-school?

**The Prime Minister:** First, on tax relief on childcare, we lost a court case against some of the existing providers, so there was a delay. The tax-free childcare will come in in 2017. As for the 30 hours, as I have said, there will be some pilot schemes this year and full implementation next year, which is in line with what we said in our manifesto. I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman is helping me to promote Government policy. When I became Prime Minister, of course, I think we had only 10 hours of childcare; then it went up to 12, then 15 and now to 30. Those are the sort of things you can do if you have a strong economy with a sound plan. If you are getting your deficit down and your economy is growing, you are able to do all those things. I am glad that we are able to talk about them.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** A National Audit Office report published today confirms that one third of the families who were promised 30 hours of free childcare will now not receive it. That is a broken promise. The report also warns that many childcare providers are not offering the new entitlement owing to insufficient funding. As a result, 41,000 three-year-olds are missing out on free early education. Will the Prime Minister intervene, and ensure that those children are given the start in life that they deserve?

**The Prime Minister:** We want all those children to have the start in life that they deserve. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the National Audit Office report. Let me read to him some of the things that it says. For instance, it says:

> “The Department has successfully implemented the entitlement to free childcare for 3- and 4-year-olds, with almost universal take-up of hours offered to parents.”

I think that we should be congratulating the Secretary of State. It also says:

> “The Department has made significant progress in providing free entitlement to early years childcare... parents and children are clearly benefiting from these entitlements... Stakeholders are... positive about increasing the entitlement to 30 hours”.

We are able to do all those things because we have a strong and sound economy. What a contrast it would be if we listened to the right hon. Gentleman. Because I regularly subscribe to the Islington Tribune, I can announce to the House that his latest economic adviser is one Mr Yanis Varoufakis, the Greek Finance Minister who left his economy in ruins. That is Labour’s policy in two words: Acropolis Now.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** That is not much help to the 41,000 children who are not benefiting from what they were promised by the Government.

Let us look further on in the educational life of children. According to the Government’s own figures, half a million children in primary schools are in classes of more than 31, and 15,000 are in classes of more than 40. We are all aware of the importance of both pre-school and early-years education to giving all our children a decent start in life, yet half a million are living in poverty, and many are in oversized classes. Is it not time for a serious Government intervention to sort this problem out?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me bring the right hon. Gentleman up to date with the figures relating to all those areas.

Introducing the extra hours of childcare is obviously a huge operation for the childcare providers, but although the National Audit Office report said that only 58% of disadvantaged two-year-olds were accessing the free childcare offer, the latest information shows that over 70% are doing so.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the number of teachers, and overcrowded classes. There are 13,100 more teachers than there were in 2010, because we have invested in Teach First and in bursaries, and we have made sure that teaching is a worthwhile career. As for school places, I want to answer the right hon. Gentleman,
because there are actually 453 fewer schools that are full or over capacity than there were in 2010—so that is progress—and there are 36,500 fewer pupils in overcrowded schools.

Why have we been able to do that? We have protected education funding. We have protected the money that followed every pupil into a school. We introduced the pupil premium, and that was the first time that any Government had recognised the extra needs of children from the poorest backgrounds. We have done all that, so our school system is growing, there are more places, and there are fewer overcrowded schools—all because we have a strong economy and the right values in place.

Jeremy Corbyn: The problem is that class sizes are growing. The problem is that there is a crisis of teacher shortages as well. I have been talking to many teachers, as, I am sure, have the Prime Minister and others. I have a question from one, Tom, who says: “I have been teaching for 10 years, and am currently head of D&T—design and technology—“at a successful secondary school. With increasing numbers of teachers leaving the profession, will the government now accept that there is a crisis in recruitment and retention?”

Will the Government accept that there is that crisis in this crucial profession?

The Prime Minister: I have just given the right hon. Gentleman the figures. There are 13,000 more teachers in our schools than there were when I became Prime Minister. However, if he is worried about teacher recruitment, perhaps he can explain this. His party proposes to put up the basic rate of tax, starting in Scotland. How will that help? It means that classroom teachers, nursery teachers and secondary teachers will all pay more tax. What we are doing is helping teachers by saying, “You can earn £11,000 before you pay any income tax at all.” I do not think that recruiting teachers is simply about money—it is also about having a good income tax at all.” I do not think that recruiting teachers, nursery teachers and secondary teachers will all pay more tax. What we are doing is helping teachers by saying, “You can earn £11,000 before you pay any income tax at all.” I do not think that recruiting teachers is simply about money—it is also about having a good income tax at all.”

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister seems to be in a bit of denial here. Ofsted and the National Audit Office have confirmed that there is a shortage and a crisis of teachers. Ensuring that there are enough excellent teachers in our schools is obviously fundamental to the life chances of children. When 70% of headteachers have warned that they are now having to use agency staff to staff their classrooms, is it not time that the Government intervened and looked at the real cost of this, which is the damage to children’s education and the £1.3 billion spent last year on agency teachers? We have this agency working situation in the national health service and also in education. Are we not moving into an era that we could term “agency Britain”?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has to look at the facts, rather than talking down the people who are working so hard to teach children in our schools. The facts are these: our teachers are better qualified than ever, with a record 96.6% of teachers in state-funded schools now having a degree or higher qualification. Those are the facts. On those going into teaching, Teach First is the most popular destination for Oxbridge graduates—something that never happened under a Labour Government. If you want to encourage people to go into teaching, you have to know that you have a good school system with more academies, more free schools and higher qualifications, and make sure that we have rigour and discipline in our classrooms, all of which has improved. All of that is possible only if you have a strong and growing economy to fund the schools that our children need.

Q3. [903842] David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): Fiddlers Ferry in my constituency is one of several UK power stations announcing closure this year. However, Germany and Holland, both of whose carbon emissions are higher than ours, are building brand new mega-coal power stations from which we will be importing coal. It is hard for me to explain the logic of this to my constituents. Could the Prime Minister review the pace of our closure programme, particularly in the context of next year’s energy crunch?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important question and he is right to say that there is big change in this industry. We want to see an increase in gas capacity and in renewables capacity, and of course the restarting of our nuclear programme, which I hope to be discussing with the French President this week. My hon. Friend is also right to say that security of supply must be our No. 1 priority, and that is why we have announced that we are going to bring forward the capacity market to provide an extra boost to existing stations, and this could indeed help Fiddlers Ferry itself. I would say to him and to everyone across the House that all these decisions we take about energy have consequences for people’s bills. He mentioned Germany, but German electricity prices are 40% higher than those of the UK; the level of subsidy makes up about 30% of German bills. Ours is less than half that level, and I think we have to think through these decisions and their consequences for energy consumers.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): We all have a right not to be discriminated against on the basis of age, gender, sex, sexual orientation, disability or ethnicity. Parents have rights to maternity and paternity leave entitlement. Workers have the right to paid holidays and the right to work for no more than 48 hours each week. All those rights are guaranteed through the European Union. Does the Prime Minister agree that there are huge social benefits from being members of the European Union?

The Prime Minister: The point I would make is that in recent years what we have done, including under this Government, is to add to the rights that people have, including maternity and paternity rights. The emphasis in Europe now needs to be on making sure that we expand our single market and make it more successful for our businesses, recognising that social benefits matter as well, but principally I believe that they are a matter for this House.

Angus Robertson: Millions of UK citizens live elsewhere in the European Union. European decisions have helped the environment by reducing sulphur dioxide emissions by nine tenths. Relations between the 28 EU member states are often imperfect but they are maintained through
dialogue and agreement, which surely is a huge improvement on the confrontations and wars of the past. Will the Prime Minister concentrate on the positive arguments for EU membership and reject the approach of “Project Fear”?

The Prime Minister: My arguments about being stronger in the reformed European Union, safer in the reformed European Union and better off in the reformed European Union are all positive arguments. I would add to that the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes, which is that things such as pollution cross borders and so it makes sense to work together. The fundamental point he makes is one worth thinking about. He and I are both post-war children, but we should never forget, when we sit around that table, that just 70 years ago these countries were murdering each other on the continent of Europe. For all the frustrations of this institution, and, believe me, there are many, we should never forget that fact—the fact that we talk, the fact that we work together and the fact that we resolve our disputes around that table.

Q7. [903845] Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Those who foster children deserve our full support. To mark fostering February, last Friday I visited Jay Fostering in my constituency, which since its establishment in 2003 has helped more than 1,250 children to find a loving and caring home. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the team at Jay Fostering, as well as the carers? Will he also agree to look into how the currently complex funding arrangements for over-18s could be considerably simplified to ease the transition of children into adulthood?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, which we started to address in the last Parliament because 18-year-olds were almost being automatically ejected from foster parent homes. We all know as parents, that it is very important to give people the support they need. That is why we changed the law in the last Parliament so that local authorities are under a duty to support young people who choose to remain with their foster carers beyond the age of 18. We have put in place the “staying put” arrangement, we are providing £44 million over three years, and in the first year of its roll-out almost half those eligible to stay put have decided to do so. This is a real advance in our fostering arrangements.

Q4. [903843] Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): As this is my first ever question to the Prime Minister, I do hope that my suit and tie match his mother’s high expectations.

In September last year, 16-year-old Mohammed Dura-Ray was stabbed to death in my constituency. His mother Mariama discovered last week that the Crown Prosecution Service will not be prosecuting the man arrested for his murder. Sadly, she joins the 84% of people in Southwark who experienced knife crime last year who have seen no one held to account. The Home Office blames local police for that low prosecution rate, and I resent the accusation that my local police are not up to the job. Will the Prime Minister commit to ensuring that my local police have the resources to investigate knife crime fully and bring more killers to justice?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman uses his first question to raise an incredibly important issue: knife crime in our country. The good news is that knife crime has come down by about 14% since 2010, but he makes an important point about the level of prosecutions. Last year there were some 11,000 prosecutions, and the rate of prosecution is similar to that for other areas, but clearly everything we can do to help the police and help the CPS to increase the rate of prosecution is wholly worth while. We need to give the police the resources they need—and we are, through the spending round; we need to educate young people on the dangers of knife crime, and we need to make sure that those who commit these crimes are properly punished.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Bernard Jenkin. [Interruption.]

Where is the fellow? He is not here. We shall hear from someone who is here. I call Mr David Davis.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): For five or six years—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I know the House is in a state of some perturbation but we must hear from the right hon. Gentleman. When he has composed himself, we will hear from him.

Mr Davis: Thank you, Mr Speaker. For five or six years, the number of national insurance numbers issued to EU migrants has been hundreds of thousands higher than the official immigration figures. That implies that the official immigration figures may be a dramatic underestimate. We can know the truth of the matter only if Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs releases its data on active EU national insurance numbers, but HMRC has refused to do so. Will the Prime Minister instruct HMRC to release those statistics immediately so that we can understand the truth about European Union immigration?

The Prime Minister: I am glad that we have the single transferable question, if not the single transferable vote! It is very good to hear from my right hon. Friend. The reason why the numbers do not tally is that a person can get a national insurance number for a very short-term visit, and people who are already here but without a national insurance number can apply for one, so the numbers are quite complex. HMRC has given greater information, and I will ensure that that continues to be the case.

Q5. [903844] Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The proposed changes to Sunday trading are causing great concern to many retailers, shop workers, their families, faith groups and all who want to keep Sunday special, yet before the election the Prime Minister said that he had no plans to change Sunday trading laws. When did he change his mind, or was it always his plan to scrap this great British compromise as soon as the election was safely out of the way?

The Prime Minister: I thought it was right to bring forward these proposals because they are genuinely new proposals—in that we are devolving to local authorities the ability to make that decision. Secondly, and crucially—I am sure that Opposition Members will be interested in this—we will be introducing new protections not only
or new workers on Sundays, but for all workers on Sundays. The House should look carefully at this idea not least because our constituents are able to shop online all day, every day, including on Sunday. All the evidence shows that these proposals will be welcomed by customers and will create more jobs. We have nothing to be scared of in moving into this new arrangement.

Q9. [903848] Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): At the weekend, I visited a young enterprise trade fair where teams from across local Staffordshire schools, including Rugeley sixth-form academy, were showcasing their entrepreneurial skills. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing good luck to all the teams, and does he agree that initiatives such as this are key to inspiring the next generation of entrepreneurs?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which is that for years not enough was done in our schools to encourage enterprise and entrepreneurship. When we know that so many of the jobs of the future will come from start-up businesses, small businesses and rapidly growing start-ups, it is absolutely right that we should be promoting enterprise in our schools, not only through teaching but through exercises and enabling young people to start businesses by giving them small grants.

Q6. [903845] Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Yesterday, Five-Quarter Energy, a north-east small and medium-sized enterprise, ceased to trade. Its goal was the extraction of gas from coal deep under the North sea. The Government failed to provide a supporting statement to secure foreign direct investment owing to their inability to comprehend that underground coal gasification would not only secure our energy supply but provide feedstocks to grow our industries, and that all that would be totally decarbonised. Will the Prime Minister look into that appalling loss of opportunity and urgently change course and develop a meaningful industrial energy strategy that British industry, workers and the planet so badly need?

The Prime Minister: I shall certainly look at the case the hon. Gentleman raises, because we back all energy projects that can create jobs and growth in our country, and we have a very active industrial strategy for that. I know that he is disappointed about our decision on carbon capture and storage, but I say to him that that is an extra £1 billion capital investment, and even after that there is no sign yet that carbon capture and storage can be even close to competitive with nuclear power or offshore wind. None the less, I will look carefully at the case that he mentions.

Q11. [903850] Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): A very large proportion of the fish caught by British vessels and landed in the UK are exported to Europe, mainly to EU countries, and, under reforms that were led by the British Government, a great many of our fishermen fish in the sovereign waters of other European Union countries. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our seas, those that exploit them, and the communities that they support are better off in a reformed European Union?

The Prime Minister: I do agree with my hon. Friend and I pay tribute to him for the huge amount of work he did to reform the common fisheries policy from what was a very poor policy to one that is now working much better for our fishermen. When it comes to fishing and farming, the key issue will be ensuring that Europe’s markets remain open to the produce that we land and grow. That will be vital to the debate that we have in the months ahead.

Q10. [903849] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When more than 1,600 families are on York’s housing waiting list; when care workers are forced to leave the city owing to the cost of renting, thereby delaying hospital discharges; when young families are placed in a single room in homeless hostels; and when supported housing schemes will have to close because of benefit changes, can the Prime Minister specifically state why up to 2,500 predominantly high-value homes are being planned for development on public land in York central, without a single home being built for social rent?

The Prime Minister: The decisions made in York about planning are for York City Council and the local plan. One of the things that we did in the previous Parliament, which was specifically designed to help York, was to alter the change of use provisions so that empty offices could be used to build flats and houses for local people, which is happening in York and will help to make sure that that city continues to thrive.

Q12. [903851] Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and my constituent William Laurie, a brilliant young farmer whose business has been put at risk because the Rural Payments Agency has not paid his basic payment scheme money? Will my right hon. Friend also confirm that the figures that the RPA keeps putting out are fictional, or does he agree with his Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that it is the European Commission’s fault for making the common agricultural policy so complicated?

The Prime Minister: The system is complicated, and we need to make sure that the Rural Payments Agency does the very best that it can. To date 70,000 farmers have received their 2015 payments, which is 81% of all claims paid, but there is always room for improvement. Indeed, we should look at all the devolved areas of the United Kingdom to see how they are coping with the problem, but more broadly it is very important that we maintain the access that our farmers have without tariff, without tax, without quota, to produce the cleanest and best food anywhere in the world and export it unhindered to 500 million people in the European single market.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Yesterday the chair of the board of the International Campaign for Tibet, Mr Richard Gere, came to the House of Commons to meet Members of Parliament as well as you, Mr Speaker. Will the Prime Minister follow the example set by the United States, Canada, Germany and Japan and write to the Chinese authorities to express his concerns about the oppressive counter-terrorism laws introduced in Tibet?
The Prime Minister: I was not aware of the visit by Richard Gere. I will look closely at what he said and perhaps get back to the right hon. Lady about the issues he raises.

Q13. [903852] Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): In 2004 the 16-year-old son of my constituent Lorraine Fraser was murdered by a gang, and the conviction of four of them was secured through joint enterprise. The recent ruling in the Supreme Court has caused Lorraine and many other victims’ families a great deal of anxiety. Will my right hon. Friend agree to facilitate a meeting to enable these families to discuss their concerns with Ministers and understand what the ruling might mean in cases such as theirs?

The Prime Minister: Through my hon. Friend, may I extend my sympathy to his constituents? He is right—we should begin by remembering the families of all those who have lost loved ones to dreadful crimes and who are worried about that judgment and what it might mean for them. I am very happy to facilitate a meeting between him and one of the Justice Ministers to discuss it. I think we should be clear that that judgment referred only to a narrow category of joint enterprise cases, and it would be wrong to suggest that everyone convicted under the wider law on joint enterprise will have grounds for appeal. It is very important that that message goes out, but I will fix the meeting that my hon. Friend calls for.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): People in the midlands are furious to learn that the Government have awarded a contract to make British medals to some French company. Imagine opening your Distinguished Service Order or your CBE to find “Fabriqué en France” on it. I think we should celebrate that great, innovative Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: The only point I would make is that one of the cases that was sorted out.

Q14. [903853] Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): A recent investigation by my local newspaper, the Derby Telegraph, uncovered reports of alleged experiments carried out on children by medics at a medical facility in Derbyshire during the ‘60s and ‘70s. Will the Prime Minister ensure that a thorough investigation is now undertaken?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. She is absolutely right to raise this matter; they are very serious allegations and it is vital that the full facts are considered. My understanding is that the police, the local authority and the NHS are working together and that there is an inquiry process under the Derby Safeguarding Children Board, in line with is procedures. I encourage anyone who knows anything about this to come forward and give their evidence to the board.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Syrian ceasefire is extremely fragile. There are reports that Russia is continuing to attack anti-Assad rebels, not Daesh, and that Islamic terrorists and weapons continue to pass into Syria across the Turkish border. What are the British Government doing to ensure that the ceasefire is properly monitored and, in particular, to reduce serious tensions between Russia and our NATO ally Turkey?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this matter. The cessation of hostilities is an important step forward, imperfect though it is, and it does enable the possibility of political negotiations starting next week. She asked specifically what we are doing to try to ensure that it is properly enforced. We are working with the Americans and the Russians to make that happen—I have a European conference call with Vladimir Putin later this week to reinforce these points. Even though the ceasefire is imperfect, the fact that we have it is progress. Not every group is included in the ceasefire, but basically we are not seeing the attacks that were taking place on the moderate opposition, which is welcome. It has also enabled us, with others, to get aid to communities that desperately need it, including through air drops and convoys.

Q15. [903854] Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): Two weeks ago I visited the Zaatari refugee camp and the surrounding area on the Jordanian-Syrian border, primarily to assess healthcare services. I was struck by the remarkable generosity of the Jordanian people. However, the local system is under significant pressure. Will the Prime Minister meet me to discuss further what Britain can do to enhance healthcare services on the ground, both for the Syrian refugees and for the wider Jordanian community?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the situation. That refugee camp is an extraordinary sight, because of the scale of the endeavour under way. I think that Britain can be proud of what we have done, in terms of the direct aid that we have given and the London conference, which raised $11 billion for the refugee camps. I know that he has a long-standing interest in what we can do to ensure that facilities are delivered quickly, including, on occasion, using military facilities, and I think that there might be opportunities for that. We also need to ensure that the emergency response from non-governmental organisations and the United Nations is as fast as it can be when such crises happen in future.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As the Prime Minister struggles with certain elements in his party over Europe, does he ever think back to an inspirational and visionary Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, who faced similar difficulties but stood up to the rebels in his own party and secured a yes vote for staying in Europe? Will he join me in celebrating the centenary of Harold Wilson’s birth next week? Across all parties we should celebrate that great, innovative Prime Minister.
The Prime Minister: I do feel a natural sympathy for anyone who has had this job, irrespective of the side of the House they were on. I think that Harold Wilson did some very important things for our country. I know that the hon. Gentleman has a particular connection to him. I wish his family well on this important centenary. I am sure that we approach things in different ways, but one thing that we would have agreed on is that Britain’s future is better off in a reformed European Union.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing our condolences to Neil and Jennifer Burdett, the parents of two-year-old Faye, who died on Valentine’s day of meningitis B. Since Faye’s death, 815,000 people have signed the petition calling on the Government to vaccinate more children against meningitis B. I am proud that the UK is the first country to have a vaccination programme for meningitis B, but could my right hon. Friend ensure that the Government look at what more could be done to prevent more children like Faye dying from this horrid disease?

The Prime Minister: On behalf of the whole House, let me extend our sympathies and condolences to Faye’s parents and to all those who have had children suffering from this terrible disease. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we were the first country in the world to have this vaccination programme. The programme was based on the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, who recommended targeting the vaccine to protect the infants at highest risk. The incidence of highest risk does occur in babies of five months, and of the 276 children contracting meningitis B last year, over 100 were under one year of age. But my hon. Friend makes important points. We need to look at all the evidence carefully, as do the expert bodies that advise us, recognising that Britain has already taken some very important steps forward by being the first country to vaccinate in this way.
State Pension Age

12.36 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): (Urgent Question):
To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement on the Government’s review of the state pension age.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Iain Duncan Smith): Yesterday we announced the appointment of John Cridland to lead an independent review of the state pension age. The review will make recommendations for the Government to consider, to ensure the future state pension age is fair and affordable in the long term.

The review will report by May 2017. I want to stress that the review is independently led and evidence led. Evidence will be put forward for Sir John to consider in his important considerations about the future of the state pension. The review will consider changes in life expectancy, as well as wider changes in society.

It is useful at this point to remind the House why this kind of review is necessary. In 1945, a man expecting to retire at 65 had a life expectancy of between 60 and 63. Men’s life expectancy rose from 14.27 years in retirement after their pension age to 27 years under the present forecast and existing timescales. Women have gone from 18 years in retirement after their pensionable age to 29.5 years in retirement.

Future generations, therefore, would rightly expect that we reflect those changes in how we set the pension. They would not thank us—we very rarely hear anybody talk about future generations—if we did not take the right decisions at the right time and did not have the courage to ensure pensions are sustainable, to avoid people having to pick up an increasing bill, which would make their lives even more difficult.

I want to make clear what this review is not about. It does not cover the existing state pension age timetable—it picks up from April 2028. We have already provided legislation for this, and the review will not look to change the state pension age up to that point.

It is worth reminding the Opposition at this point that when the Labour Government were last in power, they first legislated for state pension age rises beyond 65, but without any commitment to a special independent review, which we have undertaken. When we brought forward the Pensions Bill in 2013, the then Opposition seemed to have had a change of heart, and they—quite legitimately and reasonably, I thought at the time—agreed with us on the need for a regular independent review of the state pension age. Let me quote what the then shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member. For Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), said during the course of the Bill’s passage:

“The Secretary of State and I have no difference of opinion on the need regularly to review the state pension age.”—[Official Report, 17 June 2013; Vol. 564, c. 661.]

It is worth reminding everybody that in that Bill was a statutory provision for a regular set of reviews of the pension age. Yesterday’s announcement is simply in line with that statutory requirement. That is what we are now doing, and that is what the then shadow Secretary of State said in agreement. I also remind the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) that at the time Labour made no amendment to change the nature or scope of the review; nor, I recall, did it have anything in its manifesto to do with that.

Under the legislation, we are required to appoint an independent reviewer who will make recommendations on future state pension age requirements. We have appointed Sir John Cridland to lead this work. The legislation also requires us to report on this in 2017. I can assure the House that we will report back to the House in an oral statement and a written statement on whatever comes forward from that review.

This review is part of the Government’s reforms to pensions to ensure that they are affordable for the long term. It is right that we recognise those who have reached their pension age and who have worked hard, done the right thing, and provided for their families. I believe that this Government are delivering for those very people. As a result of our triple lock, pensioners will receive a basic state pension over £1,000 a year higher than at the start of the previous Parliament and under the previous Government. We have provided greater security and more choice and dignity for people in retirement, while also ensuring that the system is sustainable for future generations.

Owen Smith: May I start by welcoming the Secretary of State back to the Dispatch Box? We have missed him in recent months and are grateful that he is gracing us with his rare presence today.

Despite the statement we have just heard, I think that people travelling to work this morning will have been shocked to learn that the Government are planning yet another review of the retirement age and, in the immediate future, of when they can claim their state pension, with a clear implication that, as was the case with the women’s state pension, they intend to increase it further and faster than we, or the people of Britain, were expecting. People will also have been shocked to read this morning the Pensions Minister’s statement in another place, in response to the news of this review, that under the Tories the state pension age should no longer be considered as “a retirement age”. In other words, people will be able to retire only if they are rich enough or have a fat private pension; otherwise they will have to keep working—working until they drop, as one pensions professor warns this morning.

So could the Secretary of State try to clarify exactly what his Government’s long-term economic plan is for pensioners? Is it, as was the case with the botched reforms of women’s pensions, and as was implied in the terms of reference for this review, that people can expect the Government to ratchet up the retirement age much faster than expected? Can he guarantee that even if this review is not considering the planned increase to 67 by 2028, his Government will not bring forward that change? If that promise is not ratted on, can he confirm that his Government are considering speeding up subsequent rises, with increases to 69 or 70 being considered for people currently in their mid-40s? Could he also confirm that this will be a double whammy for those pension savers, as under his reforms everyone aged under 43 will have a worse state pension? Does he agree with his pensions colleague in the Lords that in the light of his reforms, the state pension age should no longer be considered as the retirement age, and so in future only the wealthy will have the luxury of retiring, while the rest will just have to keep on working?

Finally, what does the Secretary of State think is the upper limit for the state pension age? Is it 75, 76 or 77—or is it 80, as his former Pensions Minister colleague
warned today? Is not the truth that the new pension promise is not the 75p that the Tories are always banging on about, but the 75 years that people will have to work and wait under this Tory Government before they get their state pension?

Mr Duncan Smith: Well, all I can assume from that rather pathetic response is that the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) did not think that his urgent question would be granted and that, after he heard that it had been granted, he scribbled away massively, because it was utter idiocy. I want to be kind to him, because he had made a career out of being Mr Angry at the drop of a hat. I remind him—[Interruption.] Labour Members do not want to hear this, but I am going to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question. Let me remind him of exactly what his party was about before he took over as the Opposition spokesman. Let me—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the Secretary of State—[Interruption.] Order. The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) ought to know better, because he is a statesman—or, at any rate, a statesman of sorts—and should not conduct himself in an unseemly manner. As for the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell), I have told him before to be careful: if you have that hot curry too often, it tends to have an effect upon your demeanour in the Chamber.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am also worried about the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell). He has been here a long time and I want him to have a very good retirement, but he needs to calm down or he will not make it at this rate.

I remind the Opposition that the questions that the hon. Member for Pontypridd asked were all answered by his party when it was in government. It was the Labour Government who raised the state pension age—[Interruption.] Labour Members do not like being reminded of that. They did not have an independent review before they did it. They did it arbitrarily and set a set of dates, but they did not ask an independent reviewer to look at them. We are doing that now. That is what we were asked to do, and I think we are being reasonable about it.

It is also worth reminding the hon. Gentleman of what the then shadow Pensions Minister, Gregg McClymont, said when this statutory review—it is, I repeat, statutory—was passed by the Pensions Act 2014. He said—

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): You’re doing it!

Mr Duncan Smith: Yes, I am doing it, but the hon. Gentleman’s party agreed with it. He should calm down, or he will never make it to state pension age. Gregg McClymont, the then Opposition spokesman, said at the time.

“we do not oppose the Bill”.—[Official Report, 29 October 2013; Vol. 569, c. 870.]

That was Labour’s position on the statutory requirement to review the state pension age. Baroness Sherlock said:

“It is vital that the way the state pension age is reviewed is...seen to be fair”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 3 December 2013; Vol. 750, c. 146.]

That is exactly what we are doing.

It is Labour that instituted the rises in the state pension, raised women’s state pension age and went for the equalisation of state pension age. In government, it started to do the responsible things, but in opposition it is utterly irresponsible and pointless.

I have one final comment to make to the hon. Member for Pontypridd. As I stood up, somebody said to me—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The shadow Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) are both rather cerebral academics. I cannot believe that they would conduct themselves in this manner in a university seminar. If they would not do so there, they should not misbehave here. Whatever they think of what the Secretary of State is saying, they must hear it.

Mr Duncan Smith: Exactly, Mr Speaker, thank you. I say to the hon. Member for Pontypridd that, as I stood up, somebody told me—rather unfairly, I thought at the time—that he is shallow. Sadly, I now think that he gives shallow people a bad name. His response was pathetic and the urgent question was asked by an Opposition who have no policy and who jump around opposing everything and racking up spending commitments. No wonder they haven’t a hope in hell of being in government.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Every western democracy surely has a responsibility to review its state pension age on a regular basis and in a totally non-tribal, non-party political way so that its people know, a long time ahead, what changes will be made to the state pension age. If, in the past, we took too long to change the state pension age and then moved too quickly, surely now the cross-party consensus that was reached shows us that the right thing for the House to do is to set up the review, and that it should report back next year.

Mr Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend, who has spoken about the matter on a number of occasions, is right, and I thought that we had that consensus. We certainly had it during the last Parliament, because the Liberal Democrats in the coalition agreed with us. The hon. Member for Pontypridd has mentioned the former Pensions Minister, who was keen to get a state pension age review. The Pensions Commission has said that increases in the state pension age are essential and that an independent body should be established to review them. We are doing exactly that.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Life expectancy in Scotland still lags around two years behind that in the rest of the UK. That gap persists across all social demographics and costs the average Scottish pensioner around £10,000. However, I am just as concerned about healthy life expectancy, which determines the age at which people start to experience illness and disability that limit their capacity for work. Healthy life expectancy is not rising at the same speed as life expectancy; in fact, the gap between the two is widening. Given the Government’s reductions in support for sick and disabled people of working age—we are due to discuss those changes later today—can we have any confidence that further increases in state pension age will not simply condemn thousands of older people with serious health conditions to an impoverished old age on state benefits prior to their official retirement?
Mr Duncan Smith: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her tone, and she has asked a legitimate question. The whole reason why we have instituted an independent review is so that people can raise such questions. I encourage her and her party to submit to the review and to Sir John Cridland their concerns about the different demographic issues in Scotland. They are well known, and it is quite legitimate for the hon. Lady to raise them with him. The point is that because Sir John is independent, he can look at the whole question—including aspects such as demographic changes or changes in the work that people do—and take a view about it. He may recommend that we make no changes, or he may come back to us with recommendations for change. I do not preclude that, but I recommend that the hon. Lady make all those points to him.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): In 1995, when I was Chancellor, I was among those who recognised that the old system was unaffordable. We thought that we were being courageous in giving 20 years’ notice of our intention to raise the retirement age. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in hindsight, we underestimated the remarkably welcome improvements in life expectancy and in the number of women who qualify for a full pension, and that we should have gone faster? Does he also agree that, inevitably, there will be loud complaints from those who are unlucky enough to be born at a time when they are just affected by the change, but that a Government have a duty to proceed in the interests of the country and in the interests of future generations of working taxpayers, who will not be able to afford to sustain our system unless we respond to reality?

Mr Duncan Smith: My right hon. and learned Friend is correct. I thought that the position of successive Governments was to take that as a non-party political point and agree on the need to make those changes, the pace of which should be decided independently. We have done that. It was brave of the Government of whom he was a part to start the process of change, but it was always going to be necessary to review the matter in line with demographics. Recent demographic shifts have been rapid, so we are carrying out such a review now. I regret the fact that the Opposition have chosen to play political games rather than supporting this necessary change.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that millions of people, having seen what the Government did in respect of the equalisation of the state pension age for women born in the 1950s, will look at the proposal and be worried that they are about to repeat those mistakes? Will he set out what transitional arrangements he expects for the changes, and whether that opens up the opportunity to look again at the injustice that has been done to those represented by the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign?

Mr Duncan Smith: It is a legitimate concern to ensure that we give people plenty of notice, and Sir John Cridland will be looking at that carefully. If the hon. Gentleman wants to make a submission to the review about transitional arrangements, it is absolutely possible for him to do so, and I encourage him to do just that. This Government did not introduce those changes, but we introduced a transitional change for those who were affected to improve the lot of a large majority of those who would otherwise have been adversely affected.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): At the moment, there are three people paying national insurance for every person who receives a state pension; by 2040, if nothing changes, there will be only two people paying national insurance for every person who receives a state pension. There are more people in higher education than there have been in the past, and life expectancy has increased. Surely, in the long term, it is only common sense to match the retirement age to life expectancy in some way. We cannot enter the labour market later, leave it earlier, live longer and expect the state to pick up the bill.

Mr Duncan Smith: I agree with my right hon. Friend. It is worth putting that into the context of what we have already done to sustain and support pensioners in the longer term. First, we have introduced more saving through automatic enrolment. More than 6 million people are saving for a pension. Secondly, the introduction of the single tier puts pension payments above the means test, allowing people to save in the knowledge that they will always hold their savings. Thirdly, the state pension is more than £1,000 higher than it was when we came into office. That is why we need to get the demographic changes right. We are going to be fairer to pensioners and support them as other Governments have never done.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I am not going to get angry, but I gently point out to the Secretary of State that he is quite wrong to say that there is a consensus on the matter. Indeed, he has broken the consensus that he established with the excellent former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb. The agreement was that independent reviews would look every five years at life expectancy and fairness for those who were paying in, but the Secretary of State is introducing affordability, which was not part of the original proposal, as well as bringing the review forward. Will he acknowledge that that is a change from what he agreed with Steve Webb and what the coalition Government delivered?

Mr Duncan Smith: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman chooses to find a difference, because I do not think that there is one. No one has more respect for the former Pensions Minister than I do; he is a good personal friend and I thought he did a brilliant job as Pensions Minister. As coalition partners, we worked well together. He and I agreed to introduce the independent review in the Pensions Act 2014. Sir John is quite capable of looking at the matter in the round, as we have asked him to do, and making a decision on the basis of “robust, evidence-based analysis”, as set out in the terms of reference. He may yet say, “I see no need to make any change,” but I am prepared to back him on that.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Our population is growing year on year, principally through immigration, so it is right that we look to the future. Will the independent review look at two scenarios, in which Britain either can or cannot control its immigration, depending on whether we remain in Europe? Will my right hon. Friend be able to see any of the information that comes through on both those scenarios?
Mr Duncan Smith: Tempting though it is to involve the review in other areas, it is focused on the need to figure out whether, given the circumstances, demographics and affordability, the state pension age should rise and what it should be in years to come. I am happy for the review to be limited to that.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): There are 2.6 million women who feel that they have not been given enough notice of changes to their pensions. I implore the Secretary of State to be straight with young people today about the fact that those of them who are born in areas of low life expectancy will be dead before they receive a pension.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am not sure that the hon. Lady came into politics to decide that the future for people is so bleak that nothing can be done. Our role in this House is to make the changes necessary to improve people’s life chances and lengthen their life expectancy, so that they may enjoy the fruits of that life expectancy, having worked hard and saved hard, in a decent time of retirement. I am an optimist about Britain; she is a pessimist about Britain.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government intend to review the pension age every five years and to give people the opportunity to know their retirement age when they receive a pension.

Mr Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Essentially, the commitment made in the 2014 Act was to have a review in every Parliament. That will allow every Parliament to make decisions, and I hope that any changes, by the time we make them, can be done on a non-party basis. That would be the way to do it, and that is what we are engaged in.

This review was always known about. For those who are suddenly complaining that they had not noticed it, today’s written ministerial statement was down to be made yesterday. I do not recall their doing a single thing to bring it to anyone’s attention until a couple of newspapers wrote articles, after which a request for an urgent question was suddenly sent in.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I think everyone recognises that we need to review pension arrangements, especially given the demographics in the United Kingdom, but all such reviews throw up difficult cases and anomalies, not least in relation to differences in life expectancy across the regions of the United Kingdom. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the review looks at such discrepancies, and that things are properly built in to make sure that information is given out when changes are made?

Mr Duncan Smith: Much as I said to the spokesman for the Scottish nationalists, I say to the hon. Gentleman that, yes, it is recognised that there are issues about such areas. The point is that it is within scope of the review for him or anyone in his party to raise such issues with Sir John Cridland, and it is certainly within its scope for him, or anybody else he wants, to give evidence to the review.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend has given some very cogent figures to the House, particularly the change in the number of years people can expect to spend in retirement from 14 to 27. Will he confirm that the independent review will be conducted in an impartial manner? Is not what we are hearing from Opposition Front Benchers and their friends in the SNP simply scaremongering?

Mr Duncan Smith: I will repeat the figures. They are backed by what our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), the Chancellor in a previous Conservative Government, once said with great foresight. The fact is that life expectancy for a man who retired in 1945, when the pensionable age was 65, was between 60 and 63. With the same retirement age, the expected period in retirement has risen to about 27 years. We must take that into consideration. I want more people to be able to work longer, and it was me and the then Pensions Minister who raised the default retirement age to stop companies telling people that they could not work past 65. Such people can now carry on working. We have done a lot, and this review is all part of that process.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that he wanted to reward those who work hard and do the right thing. He did not do that for women born in the 1950s, many of whom were given only three years’ notice of the acceleration in their state pension age. Will he now give the House a commitment that he will not, as he did in the Pensions Act 2011, further accelerate the changes in the state pension age that are due to come in up to 2046?

Mr Duncan Smith: I accept that the hon. Lady raises a legitimate point but I wish that, in doing so, she would encompass the fact that she sat on the Labour Benches under a Government who raised the pensionable age and that accusations of “no notice” can very much be lodged at the door of the previous Labour Government. I simply say to her that, during the last Government, we made changes to improve the lot of many of those affected. As I have said, the independent review will look at all of that post-2028 and make recommendations about the best way forward. I hope that she will give evidence to the review if she has such concerns.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that countries around the globe are being forced to confront the impact of rapidly rising life expectancy levels, and it appears that only Opposition parties are in complete denial about the need for a sustainable state pension age?

Mr Duncan Smith: That is a fact. Many of our neighbours have already equalised pensionable ages and are accelerating the move to a later pensionable age ahead of us. Germany, Norway and various other countries around the world have done so, and it is only right that we should do so as well. Otherwise, we will place a burden on our children and our children’s children, who will not thank us for not taking the brave decisions that are necessary.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am 33. Will the Secretary of State tell me and others in my age cohort the age at which we will be entitled to retire?
Mr Duncan Smith: I can tell the hon. Lady that it is very clear when she and those her age will retire. It is very clear that the independent review will make recommendations. If she wants to make her position clear and give her view, she should give evidence to the independent review. We will have a review in every Parliament. I do not understand why her party is against having a review. Surely we want an independent review so that it can be fair and balanced. I would have hoped that she welcomed that.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the advantage of an independent review in every Parliament is that we should be able to give greater visibility to when changes will happen? Will he commit to not having a change with less than 10 years’ notice for those affected?

Mr Duncan Smith: That is exactly the flow of timings at the moment. Sir John Cridland has to consider that, and we want him to look at making sure that such a process happens. We want people to have plenty of notice, and I know recommendations have been made about that. As I said earlier, he will look at the timing in his terms of reference, as will the next review and so on. I would simply say to my hon. Friend that if he has an issue, he should put it to the review.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Secretary of State claims to be an optimist, but I see precious little to be optimistic about. We have had the stock Government response that, in raising any concerns, we are scaremongering. Does the Secretary of State agree that many of my constituents will, because of regional variations in life expectancy, die before they receive their state pension and have an absolute right to be scared?

Mr Duncan Smith: I am sorry that the hon. Lady takes that view. We have rising life expectancy. We have people earning more in jobs. We have more people in work. We have more people saving, and preparing for their retirement, than ever before. We have a pension coming in that means they will not get means-tested. I have to say that I am optimistic on those grounds. I do not, however, blame her for being pessimistic because if I was sitting on the Labour Benches today, I would be really pessimistic.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents approaching retirement age that the headlines splashed across this morning’s papers—in one case, saying that people will be required to work until they are 81—have no basis in fact whatever, given that this is just the start of the review and that no conclusions have been made, let alone agreed by the House?

Mr Duncan Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend. The reality is that this independent review will look at all of that. The papers have to make their own decisions—I will not be critical of them—but I would simply say that they cannot extrapolate from the announcement of a statutory independent review and say that it will somehow have certain implications for the retirement age going forward. All I would say is that it is necessary to get the balance right between people who are paying for those who have retired and people who have retired and are saving. It is the job of the Government to get that right, and I hoped it would be approached more consensually across the Floor of the House.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I want to raise another anomaly with the Secretary of State. People who worked in Northern Ireland when they were 14 and 15 paid national insurance contributions between 1947 and 1957, but those contributions did not count towards their pension entitlement because the school leaving age in Britain was a little higher. Can that anomaly be raised with Sir John Cridland and addressed so that it can finally be rectified?

Mr Duncan Smith: As I understand it, that specific issue is not within the scope of the review, but I am certainly happy to talk to the hon. Lady about it. In general, the point about the review is that it is the first time—I would have hoped this would therefore be welcomed—that someone has asked an independent body to review such anomalies. I am very happy to speak to her if she wants to come and see me.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): This is a policy on which there should be consensus and cross-party support. The evidence is that we are living longer and healthier lives, and not just in Mid Dorset and North Poole, so there should be optimism across the country. Does the Secretary of State agree that the responsible thing to do is to have an independent review, follow the statutory regime and examine the evidence and all the options, rather than scaremongering and using phrases such as “working until they drop”?

Mr Duncan Smith: I must say that I was slightly surprised earlier today when I saw the Opposition spokesman tweeting the most inflammatory comments about people retiring. I can understand that those in opposition need to try to get attention, but to start worrying and scaring people without foundation or reality is nothing short of appalling. I wish the hon. Gentleman would get up and apologise for that.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The review will consider variations in pension arrangements between “different groups”. Will the Secretary of State give more detail on whether “different groups” refers to occupations, such as shift workers or, to give an example from my constituency, bus drivers, who get chronic bladder conditions? The life expectancy and health of those groups deteriorates as a result of their occupation. Will those issues be raised in the review?

Mr Duncan Smith: It is certainly within scope for that matter to be raised with the reviewer. He and his team have the power to review it. I recommend that the hon. Gentleman raises that concern. It is up to the reviewer to what degree he looks at it.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Notwithstanding the antics of the Labour party, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right to underscore the national importance of this issue and I commend the approach that his Department has set out. Despite the depressing and dispiriting response from the Opposition parties, will he...
undertake to continue to try to build a national consensus and a consensus across the House on this issue, as it affects all our constituents and should be above party politics?

Mr Duncan Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend. My door is always open and I am always ready to see somebody, even if they then change their mind. I have found the tweet that the shadow Secretary of State sent this morning—strangely, not after he had seen the statement, but only after he had seen the newspapers. It states:

“Pensions Minister scraps retirement for all but the rich and those lucky enough to have a good private pension!!!”

How ridiculous is that? This is the announcement of a statutory review that his party agreed with in 2014. He really needs to apologise.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The Secretary of State and all of us here are fortunate to have satisfying, well-paid jobs, but many of our countrymen and women work just to survive. Will the review look at whether it should always be the presumption that living longer means working longer, or might we look at alternative ways of funding the basic state pension so that people are able to benefit and live fulfilled lives in retirement as a result of better healthcare and the fact that we are living longer?

Mr Duncan Smith: Again, that is a wholly legitimate question for the hon. Gentleman to raise. As I said to his party’s spokesman, that matter is within scope for the reviewer, if he wishes to raise it. The reviewer and his party to ask the reviewer to look at that balance and to see whether some of the presumptions are necessary, and I urge him to do so.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): The Secretary of State has been a champion of pensioners with the triple lock, the single-tier pension and automatic enrolment, which is now benefiting more than 6 million people. Does he agree that, in the light of the cross-party support for an independent review in 2014, it is rank hypocrisy for Labour Front Benchers to try to make political capital out of it today?

Mr Duncan Smith: I genuinely regret that the consensus that was achieved for the 2014 legislation has been tossed aside in a matter of hours by the Opposition, apparently over breakfast this morning. [Interruption.]

I urge them, instead of chuntering away on the Front Bench this morning—strangely, not after he had seen the statement, but only after he had seen the newspapers. It states:

“How ridiculous is that? This is the announcement of a statutory review that his party agreed with in 2014. He really needs to apologise.”

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State rule out the prospect of the pension age being increased to 84 as a result of the review, as was predicted by the previous Pensions Minister, Steve Webb? Are the Government prepared to set any upper limit on the state retirement age?

Mr Duncan Smith: The hon. Lady should not grab on to and believe everything that is printed in the newspapers. They have their own legitimate reasons for publishing stuff. There is nothing in the review that talks about that. I have said categorically that John Cridland will review, within the terms of reference, where we should go with state pension ages and look at other aspects, such as affordability, within the context of what people have done and what their details are. If the hon. Lady has a particular issue she wants to raise, she should raise it with him.

What is untenable is that the hon. Lady’s party opposes an independent and regular review of state pensions. Why would anybody do that? [Interruption.] I hear

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): May I ask the Secretary of State about different occupations? Certain professions, such as those who serve in the armed services, the fire brigade and the police, require a lot of physical strength. We should even think about surgeons, who will have to operate on people later on in life. Has Sir John Cridland been asked to look at those people’s retirement ages?

Mr Duncan Smith: That is another legitimate question. It is within scope for the hon. Lady to raise it with John Cridland and I urge her to do so. A number of similar points have been made. Of course, he will have to make the final decision about the balance of his review within the terms of reference, but this matter is certainly within the terms of reference. I wish those on the Front Bench of the hon. Lady’s party had taken such a positive view.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I have listened to this discussion for 45 minutes and, setting aside the bluster from some of the Opposition parties, the only point of divergence that I can see is on whether the Government have included a requirement for this five-yearly statutory inquiry to consider affordability. Is that the case, does my right hon. Friend agree that affordability should definitely be part of any inquiry into our pensions system?

Given that we have a national debt of £1.7 trillion or £24,000 for every man, woman and child in this country, it would be a crime for the Government not to consider whether our pension age is affordable. I hope that the other parties will reconsider, particularly Labour and the Lib Dems, given that this was the only point of difference that their spokesmen could raise.

Mr Duncan Smith: I agree with my hon. Friend. I thought that there was consensus on this matter, but it has apparently been torn up. I urge those on the Opposition Front Bench to change their minds and engage with the review. Of course affordability will be considered. I do not know of any Government that would genuinely say, “We will make some change and not think about whether it is affordable.” Hang on a second—the last Labour Government did that, actually. I am sad to hear that the Opposition are following their usual trend, which is to shout a lot and make commitments they could never possibly meet if they were in government.
the shadow Secretary of State shouting, “Rigged.” The only thing that was rigged was the way that he got on to the Front Bench to be the Opposition spokesman.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As someone who accepted the rise in his own pension age to 68 in 2007 on the basis of the evidence presented by the Labour party, it has been disappointing to hear the tenor of the Opposition’s comments today. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that the review will be independent and that it will take into account factors across the country, not just in London and the south-east, that affect life expectancy? Will he assure me that we will seek to have constructive engagement with the Opposition? If we cannot get it with the shadow Secretary of State, perhaps we should try to get it with the shadow Pensions Minister instead.

Mr Duncan Smith: I agree. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The important thing is that there is an independent review and that we own up to the decisions that we have to take. I wish the Opposition would accept that they took decisions about the state pension age. They have collective amnesia about anything that happened not just pre-2010, but apparently pre-2015. I expect that they will shortly forget everything pre-2016 and that it will go on like that. They should wake up, smell the coffee and get on with being an Opposition in the hope of being in government, not perpetually in opposition.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is concerning and disappointing that further changes are being considered, given that the Government have not even fixed the botched mess they made of the transition for women born in the 1950s. Several of those women have come to my constituency surgery and some of them face losses of up to £30,000 as a result of the unfair transition. I wonder how many of the WASPI women have gone to the Secretary of State’s surgeries or those of his Ministers and what message he has had for them.

Mr Duncan Smith: The terms of this urgent question and the review are to look beyond 2028. I accept that there are demographic issues in Scotland, such as a faster ageing population, that cause particular issues. I would therefore hope that the hon. Gentleman and his party welcomed an independent review by an independent individual that can look at any aspects and problems in Scotland that they wish to raise. I urge them to do that. I take it from the nodding of his head that he welcomes the independent review, unlike the Labour Front Benchers.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State ensure that the Cridland review moves the indicator from life expectancy to health—mental as well as physical health—particularly for post-menopausal women, and that people can have quality of life post-retirement, so that we can gain from that social capital and people can look forward to their retirement?

Mr Duncan Smith: The hon. Lady raises a wholly legitimate set of issues and concerns. We must consider how we deal with people who retire and their quality of life in retirement. I therefore agree with her, and urge her to talk to the review and ask that it finds some way to look at those issues, which we need to consider anyway.
Humanitarian Crisis: Greece

1.20 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on the developing humanitarian crisis in Greece.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Justine Greening): I am delighted to be here to respond to the urgent question.

A situation of humanitarian concern is unfolding in Greece. There are reportedly approximately 10,000 people at the border between Greece and Macedonia. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that around 24,000 people—maybe more—are stranded across Greece. Greek authorities have established two camps at the border with a projected total capacity of 12,500, but crowded conditions are putting pressure on delivering essential support to people.

The UK is already providing nearly £55 million to the Mediterranean migration crisis response. This includes essential supplies such as blankets, sleeping mats and tents, as well as support through non-governmental organisations and UN agencies. The UK has established a new refugee children fund for Europe, which will meet the specific needs of unaccompanied and separated children.

We should of course remember that the vast majority of Syrians who have fled Syria are in countries neighbouring Syria. That is why the UK continues to be at the forefront of the response to the crisis in the region. The recent London conference on Syria raised more than $11 billion with the Prime Minister announcing that the UK will more than double our total pledge to the Syria crisis from £1.12 billion to more than £2.3 billion. As part of this, we are working in partnership with host countries such as Jordan and Lebanon to help them expand job and education opportunities for refugees in a way that will enable them to better support themselves and give them hope for the future where they are.

The UK is working across the EU to ensure that a humanitarian crisis is averted and that the most vulnerable people are protected and provided with shelter. We are monitoring the situation closely. We stand ready to meet other priority needs and are sending a team to Greece to assess the situation.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her answer. We all recognise the important role that the Department for International Development has played in responding to the humanitarian crisis. Sadly, I regret that the same cannot be said of the Home Office, hence my targeting the question at that Department.

Yesterday, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees warned that Europe faces an imminent humanitarian crisis, largely of its own making. As the Secretary of State reported, UNHCR described crowding and shortages of food, shelter, water and sanitation in Greece. I agree with her that, first, we need an emergency aid response, and the £55 million to which she referred is indeed welcome. However, secondly, we need an urgent strategic response from other European states to share responsibility for supporting Greece in processing and hosting arrivals. Does she agree that closing borders, tear gas and rubber bullets do not amount to the required strategic response? Is it not obvious, as the UN has pointed out, that Greece cannot manage the situation alone?

Will the Secretary of State please now agree with the UN that it remains vital that the European agreements on relocation are prioritised and implemented? If not, who do the Government think should take on the responsibility? Is it the Government’s position that Greece alone must shoulder it? If she agrees that the challenge of relocation should be shared, how can the UK Government defend not playing their part in that?

Will the Secretary of State also back UN calls for increased regular pathways for the admission of refugees from countries neighbouring Syria? In the light of the unfolding tragedy, will the Government look again at increased resettlement, expanded family reunification, private sponsorship and humanitarian and refugee student and work visas? Surely, in that way, we can reduce dangerous journeys, save lives and support Greece.

Justine Greening: I will start with the hon. Gentleman’s final point. He is right that ensuring that refugees can get on with life, even though they cannot be at home, is incredibly important. That is why the London conference focused not just on jobs and work permits so that refugees can work in neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, but on ensuring that children are back in school, and looking ahead further than the next few years to their future. Those new, groundbreaking steps are important to understand how we can tackle more comprehensively the sort of crisis that is emanating from the conflict in Syria.

On the hon. Gentleman’s other points, the UK has worked hand in hand with the UN. We hosted the London conference with the Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, and I welcome the announcement that has just come from the EU about the step-up in support for refugees who arrive in Europe. I should say that the announcement has just been made, but our initial look at it—we need to examine it in greater detail—suggests that it proposes precisely the response that the UK has already put in place. It focuses on enabling NGOs that are already on the ground to do a better job, and UNHCR to do a stronger job, particularly in processing and registering refugees. Doubtless, as we get into the detail of the announcement, it will give us more of an indication of exactly what the plans are, but they certainly look like ones that we would welcome.

The hon. Gentleman asked about how Europe more broadly is responding to the crisis. Essentially, there are two different aspects alongside the pieces that I have just mentioned. One is sensible border control. The UK is not part of the Schengen area, for reasons that have become clear in recent months. However, it is important that countries such as Greece are helped to ensure that they can manage their borders more effectively. That is why the Home Office has worked with the Greek authorities. Of course, it is also important that, when refugees arrive in Europe, they make use of mechanisms such as the Dublin convention. We have a co-ordinated approach of dealing with refugees in Europe, but the challenge is that that has broken down in recent months. The UK has taken a clear position based on our proud history of accepting people who seek asylum and refugees, but of course the approach needs to be sensibly managed both for those who want to claim asylum and refugee status, and for the countries where people seek safety.
Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I am very pleased to hear my right hon. Friend recognise that we are talking about refugees, not migrants, that the two are different, and that we are dealing with men, women and children who are fleeing war zones. This country has a proud and honourable tradition, which is being honoured now in our seeking to assist, but the European Union response has been chaotic. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) is right: using rubber bullets and tear gas against children and women is not the answer. When will my right hon. Friend and her colleagues in our Cabinet seek to convene a European meeting to produce a proper and holistic response?

Justine Greening: For many months, we have pressed for the comprehensive approach that, as my hon. Friend says, is required. The crisis has not emerged just in the last few weeks. There is an EU-Turkey summit next week, which will give us a good chance to see a more structured response from the European Union. However, throughout the process, the UK approach has steadily emerged as the most sensible. First, it deals with root causes. It helps people where they are in the region, and considers some of the reasons for their loss of hope about staying there, such as lack of jobs and the inability to get their children back into school. Where people need to relocate, we are enabling them to do so safely and securely.

We are working with UNHCR and other agencies on the ground to identify the most vulnerable people affected by this crisis in the region, and we are relocating those who need relocation in a sensible, managed way. That is much better for those people because they do not have to put their lives in the hands of people smugglers, and it is significantly better for the countries that people go to, because it enables them—as in the UK—to work with local authorities and communities, and ensure that they are prepared to take in refugees who are being relocated, and that the right services and provisions are in place when they arrive.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Secretary of State has spoken again about what the Government are doing for refugees in the middle east, which is wholly commendable, but this urgent question is about the millions of refugees—including half a million Syrians—in Europe, and especially the plight of Greece. I was in Greece last month. The Greek people have been as hospitable as they can be, but their Prime Minister said this week that with the closure of the Macedonian border, and with tens of thousands of people backing up in Greece in the streets of Athens and on the islands, Greece runs the risk of becoming a permanent “warehouse of souls”.

What are the Government doing to get bilateral aid to the Greeks in this crisis, and to encourage Turkey to do something about the thousands of refugees who are being shipped from Turkey into Greece, with some coming increasingly from north Africa? What pressure are the Government bringing to bear on Turkey to put a stop to that and to make it easier for refugees in Turkey to work and get education for their children? Irrespective of the fact that we are not in Schengen, what are the Government doing to work with fellow members of the European family of nations to be more effective against people traffickers and provide safe routes for refugees?

Above all, how can we turn our back on the people of Greece, who risk being overwhelmed because of the absence of a strategic and humanitarian approach to this issue from all EU nations, including the UK?

Justine Greening: I strongly disagree with the hon. Lady’s last statement, because the UK is the largest contributor to the humanitarian response, including in Europe, and we have provided nearly £55 million to the Mediterranean migration crisis. She will be aware of the work that we have done in the Mediterranean helping to save lives in recent months with our Royal Navy and Border Force cutters. We have provided Greece with around £19 million of support in total, much of that to help the UNHCR, some to help NGOs on the ground and amazing organisations such as the Red Cross, and some to help the International Organisation for Migration. We have also worked with Greece to help it manage its borders more effectively.

The work that Britain is doing is showing the way to other member states in Europe with a sensible, thoughtful approach to this crisis that can help us not only to deal with root causes, which is what we are doing in the region, but to show that we must all provide support to refugees who are arriving closer to home here in Europe. The UK is leading the way in that.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and her ministerial team, who are doing an excellent job in difficult circumstances. The International Organisation for Migration suggests that 97,000 people have entered Greece in the past two months alone, which is eight times more than in the same period last year. Not all of them are Syrian refugees, although the majority are. What more can the Government do to work with the Governments of Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Morocco, who make up the other 17%?

Justine Greening: Part of that is ensuring that we consider some of the root causes that make refugees undertake these journeys in the first place. My hon. Friend will be aware of much of the work that we are doing in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and also for people who are shifting from parts of Africa. Much of our aid programme is intrinsically focused on improving opportunities in the countries where those young people grow up. In the end, the only solution to these sorts of crises is peace, for those driven by conflicts such as that in Syria, and development, in the case of migration flows that are due to people feeling that they do not have opportunities on their doorstep, and that they want to find better opportunities elsewhere.

Turkey currently has 2 million Syrian refugees, and we should praise the generosity of Turkey and Turkish communities—many of which I have had a chance to meet over the past few years—for the hospitality that they have provided. We will not rise to the challenge of dealing with this crisis by pointing the finger at other countries, although I know it is tempting to do so. We would like other countries in Europe to contribute more, as the UK has done, but in the end we will rise to this challenge by working more collaboratively together in a thoughtful, evidence-based way that understands the drivers behind what is making people move, while not accepting criminality such as people smuggling.
Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), I recognise the role that DFID has already played, but can the Secretary of State confirm that her response today does not include any new announcements of funding or resource? Does that mean that this latest crisis was somehow foreseen in the needs analysis that the Government carried out before the funding announcements that they have already made? What general needs analysis was carried out before the Government decided to double their pledge at the Syria funding conference? The UK Government’s response cannot simply be about funding; at some point we must take our fair share of refugees from Europe to the United Kingdom, and by anyone’s calculation, 20,000 people over four years is not a fair share.

Justine Greening: First, our pledge to slightly more than double existing support to the crisis in Syria and the region affected by it was sensible and reflects the situation on the ground and what is needed. If we are to do the right thing, that means going beyond simply providing day-to-day life-saving supplies, because we must also get children back in school. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman’s characterisation of Britain as not having played its role in helping people more directly in the region to relocate. The Prime Minister has set out what I think is a sensible approach of taking 20,000 people over the course of this Parliament. Those will be the most vulnerable people who would otherwise have absolutely no prospect of getting out of that region. We are working directly with UN agencies and with local authorities around the country to help those people do just that. There will also be people in Scotland who provide a home to those people, and we must ensure that when we bring them to the UK, it is done in a sensible, measured and effective manner.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for coming to the House—I know they care deeply about the plight of refugees, and I do not doubt for one minute that they are working exceptionally hard on this issue. However, given what I saw when I visited Lesbos a month ago, I am not surprised by the chaos that Greece is now in—you could see it coming. The Secretary of State kindly agreed to meet me to hear about what I had seen, and it is my fault that the meeting did not happen, for which I apologise.

I remain convinced that the UK has a greater leadership role to play to ensure that Greece is supported and not left to collapse and be abandoned by the rest of Europe, as is happening now. In the mix of this whole sorry mess, unaccompanied and orphaned—let us call them what they really are—children, are still there and need our care and hope, and I believe that the UK and other countries have a moral obligation to home them. I am being simplistic, but for me, blankets are not enough. Our leadership in the region and in Syria is exemplary and I will not hear a word said against it, but there are orphaned children in Europe now. Can we not take some?

Justine Greening: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I am still very happy to meet her directly and I am sorry she was not able to make the meeting we had planned. She is right to raise the issue of how children are affected by this crisis. It is why we have put education at the heart of our response.

On children who are arriving in Europe, my hon. Friend will be aware that we have announced a £10 million fund to ensure that we have a much better system of identifying children across Europe, working with UNHCR to make sure children are specifically protected and in safe spaces, and are able to get to where they are trying to get to in a way that does not put them at any more risk. A number of countries across the European Union can help to provide safety for children. That is what we want to happen—we want a more co-ordinated approach. My hon. Friend will be aware that we are extending our vulnerable persons scheme to include unaccompanied children. The one bit of good news in all of this is that, in part because of DFID’s work in the Syria region, children arriving in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon are being reunited with their families.

I can absolutely reassure my hon. Friend. Friend that our desire is to make sure that children are taken care of. Implicit in her assumption is that many children want to come to the UK. Under the Dublin convention, if they are able to claim asylum and have links into the UK, we can consider their cases. This is one reason why it is so important to make sure that children are registered and inside the system. We are focusing on making sure that that happens. As she will know, it can be a very chaotic situation. Sometimes one of the biggest challenges we face is that children are very reluctant to come forward to the authorities. That is a problem we are trying to overcome.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The situation in Greece is becoming dangerous and could well implode as the crisis gets worse. I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that the humanitarian aid from Britain and the EU is not yet enough to help Greece to cope with the crisis. Will she agree to look at how many refugees arriving in Greece have family in Britain who could look after them? Will she get that assessment done? Will she consider whether the refugee resettlement programme could be extended not just to one with young, unaccompanied refugees, as the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) said, but others with family in Britain who could look after them, so that Britain can do its bit in a fair way?

Justine Greening: Today’s EU announcement is possibly one of the first big steps towards ensuring that the level of response in Europe is on the scale required. I agree with the right hon. Lady on that. Countries, including Britain, have stepped forward to do what they can. We work where we can with the Greek authorities, but more is required. It is good that the announcement appears to be scaling up against those needs.

On the right hon. Lady’s second point, I reiterate that we have good and sound processes that sit behind our asylum and refugee system here in the UK—obviously, we are not part of the Schengen area. Those are perfectly sensible approaches to work through the issue of where refugees will finally end up. We will not be a part of a pan-EU relocation approach. We think that that simply plays into the hands of people smugglers, who are perhaps the only people who gain from the present situation. We prefer a much more sensible approach, which is taking people directly from the region.
Justine Greening: I agree very strongly with my hon. Friend. By pursuing the UK aid strategy of doing the right thing by some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world, we also do the right thing by ourselves. Perhaps the worst long-term challenge of the many facing Syria is that many of its best and brightest are leaving the region. The more we can help people to stay close to home and close to their families, the more we prepare for Syria to have the people it needs to help it get back on its feet. As it stands that prospect seems a long way off, but that does not mean we should not try to do our best to achieve it.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and I were told last Thursday by Europol that 90% of the migrants who enter the EU do so because they are supported by organised criminal gangs. When will we get a statement from Ministers to tell us that there is success against the organised criminal gangs that are doing so much damage to the people of Europe? When is Turkey going to get the £3 billion we promised it to help it to deal with this crisis?

Justine Greening: The right hon. Gentleman will see that on the Treasury Bench with me is the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), who I am sure will respond to his point on progress in tackling organised crime. When we get a statement from Ministers to tell us that there is success against the organised criminal gangs that are doing so much damage to the people of Europe? When is Turkey going to get the £3 billion we promised it to help it to deal with this crisis?

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am really proud of the fact that this country is the biggest financial contributor in Europe to dealing with this crisis—a point that is too easily dismissed by Opposition parties. However, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact is far less sanguine about the contribution of the European Union. What can my right hon. Friend do to put pressure on her interlocutors to ensure that some of the money that the EU gives to loony projects is diverted to assist in this crisis within our own European borders?

Justine Greening: As my hon. Friend probably knows, I am what I would call an aid disciplinarian. That probably comes from my innate chartered accountant perspective, which means I always need to see effective projects that are well run and deliver value for money. That is absolutely what we have been pressing for and working with the European Union to do. Our push has essentially been to see the EU mirror the UK strategy on doing more effective work in the affected regions and see it step up to the plate on managing this crisis closer to home, which is what today’s announcement seems to be about. It is good to see the EU starting to move in the right direction. Of course, we took further steps at the London conference a few weeks ago, which we also welcomed.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is hard to overstate the national and regional dangers from Greece becoming a giant refugee camp. That is all the more the case because the refugee crisis cannot be through UNHCR and, latterly, assisting UNICEF on child protection. Although we often focus on the amounts of aid we are giving, the most effective aid is often technical assistance, which is very cost-effective and highly effective in terms of outcomes.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Secretary of State is absolutely right. Solving this crisis will require a co-ordinated approach across Europe. Surely, however, it is now apparent that to get that co-ordinated approach, we have to have some acts of political leadership? Last year, 90,000 unaccompanied children registered and applied for asylum in Europe. Does that not demonstrate the modesty of the call for this country to take 3,000? Surely this is a time when the Government should say yes to that very modest call for political leadership.

Justine Greening: We have shown political leadership, not just in terms of the scale and the shaping of the humanitarian response in the region but in how we have responded to it closer to home. As I have said, Britain has done more than any country to provide support to refugees more broadly. As I set out to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), we have done a huge amount of work to support unaccompanied children. Many Parliaments across Europe will be debating this issue, but few will be able to be as proud as the UK, given the work across government and the support being provided by so many British people to refugees in the region and to those arriving in Europe. I can reassure him, as I did my hon. Friend, that we are working very hard on the issue of unaccompanied children. We are absolutely playing our role.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to focus on the humanitarian crisis in Greece, but does she agree that the wider region is important? For those who criticise the international aid budget, does she agree that not investing the 0.7% in countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which have taken in millions of refugees, would mean a far bigger reduction in our growth prospects? This is not just morally the right thing to do, but is the sensible thing to do.

Justine Greening: It is in several different areas. Part of it is more Home Office-related assistance on border management, and part of it is humanitarian, working
disentangled from the crisis in the Greek economy and infrastructure. When I visited a refugee camp on one of the islands, I found that the island had already lost its healthcare service, as have so many other islands. In addition to the humanitarian assistance, which is very welcome, what discussions are the British Government having within the EU to discuss the state of the Greek economy, which is very heavily dependent on tourism? There is a risk that the Greek economy will implode under the pressure of a growing refugee crisis this year.

**Justine Greening:** At the ministerial meetings I attend as a Development Minister, we discuss the challenges that we face much closer to home. We should learn from what has happened in Jordan and Lebanon—that we should not expect countries to be able to cope on their own when they suddenly see huge numbers of people flowing in that they were not expecting. It is not simply a matter of financial pressures because pressures are placed on local communities. That is why the UK has done a lot and why I welcome the announcement that we think is coming from the EU today. This is the right thing to do for the refugees that are arriving. As has been said, it has taken some time for the penny to drop across Europe about what needs to be done closer to home, but I am proud of the work that the UK has done in trying to make sure that the levels of support that people need are now being put in place.

**David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con):** Does my right hon. Friend agree that the refugees from the region, after the United States. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a lot more needs to be done?

**Justine Greening:** I think there are two elements here. One part is responding to the humanitarian crisis itself. As my hon. Friend says, a number of genuine refugees caught up in the Syrian crisis are coming over, but there is also the crisis in Iraq, particularly with the impact of Daesh in northern Iraq, which has also led to refugees coming over. As he points out, another part of the problem is economic migrants. That is why it is so important to have strong processes in place to deal with refugees and asylum cases, but also with migration. As a London MP, I often deal with immigration casework, so I am perhaps as familiar with it as any other MP in this Parliament. Having strong processes in place to work through those different cases is vital. That is why, despite the emotional pressures, we are right to stick to that plan and stick to our strategy—that Britain should have the ability to set its own rules on migration, which is why we are not in the Schengen area.

**Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP):** Apart perhaps from a couple of contributions from Tory Members, the Secretary of State will have heard a cross-party consensus today that we are dealing with a humanitarian and a refugee crisis. There is a great deal of cross-party support for a friendly reception for the efforts made in region by the Government. Will the right hon. Lady therefore respond by accepting that the scale of the issue we now face requires a re-examination of the scale of the bilateral support to Greece? Secondly, without a meaningful contribution to the resettlement—and I mean a meaningful contribution—will it not be more difficult to get the solidarity across Europe that will be required to deal with this issue properly?

**Justine Greening:** As ever, we will continue to make sure that the support we give to all the countries affected by the crisis is at a level that we think is sensible. As I have set out, Britain has, frankly, done as much as any in helping refugees who are arriving in Europe. That is why a significant proportion of what we provide has been given to countries such as Greece where the refugees have arrived. I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s second point about our approach to relocation. I think our approach is the sensible approach, one that is increasingly recognised across Europe as sensible and pragmatic.

My final point to the right hon. Gentleman is that the people we are able to relocate are the most vulnerable people from the region, those identified by agencies like the UNHCR as needing to be removed from the region in order to get back on with their lives and receive the support they need to do so. I think we are right to focus on the most vulnerable people affected by this crisis; that will continue to be our approach.

**Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State and the Government for the leadership they have shown in making us the biggest donor of humanitarian support in region, after the United States. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the refugees from the middle east are the victims of terrorists and traffickers, so taking into the United Kingdom the refugees who have already reached the safety of Europe is simply playing into the hands of those evil traffickers who are exploiting people so appallingly?

**Justine Greening:** I think my hon. Friend is right. In the end, there is no getting away from the fact that overwhelmingly people want to stay in the region where they had their home and grew up—the area with which they are most familiar and where their closest family is likely to be based. I think the failure of the international community to do enough is what has led to the sorts of flows that we are now seeing. That is why the London conference a month ago was so important. It is also why we need to see more countries doing more in the region. We should not lose sight of the need for more international leadership, matching that of Britain, in the region so that refugees can be supported in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon. They have been generous, but they are saying that this is an extremely difficult situation for them to cope with. Let us not lose sight of that.

**Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab):** Greece is, of course, a great country and an important and long-standing ally of ours. The people of Greece, however, are still suffering badly from the financial crisis, and the refugee and humanitarian crisis is pushing them to the brink. Help from the EU has so far been slow and inadequate. Despite what has been said today, does the Secretary of State truly believe that the EU strategy to give Greece the proper help that is needed is in place? Does she not agree that a lot more needs to be done?
Justine Greening: As ever, it is all about today’s announcement, which we understand to be about €700 million for the next three years, and about making sure that that money is invested sensibly. It is important that Greece itself is willing and able to work with NGOs on the ground and with the UNHCR so that the best work can be done. One of the biggest changes affecting Jordan and Lebanon that has enabled us to help to create more jobs was the important decision of those countries to allow refugees to have work permits. That enabled us to do more to help them get the jobs so that they were able to support themselves. It is important that we are able to work effectively with the Greek authorities to make the most of the additional resourcing and investment so that we can help people as much as we possibly can.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I fear that Members on both sides of the House are failing to acknowledge two pertinent facts. Not only has the European Union visited penury and misery on the people of Greece because of its cruel monetary policy, but that has been compounded by the fact that its largest member has completely disregarded, in a high-handed and arrogant way, the Dublin protocols that my right hon. Friend mentioned earlier.

May I ask what efforts the Government are making to distinguish between economic migrants and refugees, and — returning to an undertaking that the Prime Minister gave me before Christmas — what special efforts are being made to target our resources at the persecuted minorities in the middle east, particularly Christians?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend has, in fact, raised three issues. First, we are working with the International Organisation for Migration to secure better data and evidence relating to the flows of migrants and refugees. Secondly, we are not in the Schengen area, which means that we can more readily make decisions on how to deal with the various people who seek to come to Britain, depending on whether they are claiming asylum, seeking refugee status or, indeed, just wanting to come here to work as migrants.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the issue of certain minorities. I had a chance to go to Irbil, where I met, among others, Christian minorities who had been persecuted and caught up in the Iraqi crisis and the territorial gains that Daesh was making in Iraq at the time. I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are very conscious of the need not to lose sight of the groups who have been most affected by the crisis. We often talk of its impact on children, but, as he rightly points out, whole communities have been targeted in some areas.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): There should be concern about the impact on Greece’s social structure of the double blow that it has experienced: first, the effect of membership of the euro on its economy, and now the chaotic immigration policy that is being pursued by the EU.

Many Syrian leaders who are looking to the future are saying that people should be kept as close to Syria as possible and co-ordinated through aid. It is about getting them into the hands of the traffickers who wish to smuggle them into Europe. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Governments of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey about the resources that they need in order to sustain that number of people in their own countries, and what hope has she of persuading her EU partners to join the United Kingdom in stumpng up some money to support those efforts?

Justine Greening: We have had many discussions with the countries that have experienced the biggest flows of refugees over recent years, particularly the ones that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

I think the London conference on Syria was especially important when it came to persuading other countries to step up to the plate alongside Britain, and to do more to help provide the resources that are needed by countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. As the hon. Gentleman will know, at the end of last year the United Nations appeal was just over 50% funded, but following the London conference, only five weeks into this year, some 70% to 80% of this year’s needs have already been resourced. Nevertheless, we still need other countries to do more. The crisis will be ongoing for some time, and unfortunately, while I was delighted by the success of the Syria conference — the largest ever amount was pledged in a single day — it should be seen as the beginning, not the end, of the international community’s better response.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Riot police, tear gas and rubber bullets are increasing the risks to lone children, and, sadly, also increasing their price tag for trafficking purposes. I saw that for myself in Calais on Monday, and the situation is the same in Greece. There is no effective identification and processing of lone children, especially those with connections to the United Kingdom. Can the Secretary of State assure me that the welcome 28 January commitment to increase the safety of lone children in Europe, as well as in conflict zones, will help the desperately vulnerable children who have no hope of access to the safe legal routes to which she has referred, and prevent them from getting into the hands of traffickers?

Justine Greening: I hope I can provide that reassurance, which is, in a sense, twofold. First, it is about enabling vulnerable children in the region to be relocated when that is necessary, working with UN agencies. Secondly, it is about the £10 million fund that we established to make better and stronger identification possible so that we can get children into the system. We are providing funds to ensure that children receive the kind of specialist protection that they need, can be helped to understand how to deal with the situation in which they have found themselves, and can be given trauma counselling. Even when we have reached an “end point” in our work to help unaccompanied children, they will often need further support in order to be able to get on with their lives effectively because of the experiences that they have been through, and the United Kingdom is ensuring that, whenever possible, we can provide that as well.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The people traffickers are benefiting from a clear Russian policy: to weaken resolve in Syria, to create a crisis in Europe and weaken our humanitarian values, and to weaken neighbouring states such as Jordan, Lebanon, Greece and Turkey. Last week, Saudi Arabia told the Defence Committee that it had offered visas to Syrian families, allowing them to move in with their own family members.
It has offered them work permits, and opportunities for education, employment and healthcare. Why can we not do the same for Syrian refugees who have clear links with the United Kingdom?

Justine Greening: We have a relocation scheme, and the Dublin convention provides routes enabling people with clear links to the UK to come here. Ultimately, however, we need a co-ordinated and managed approach to migration. We are not in the Schengen area—for all the right reasons, as we can see—and it is right for Britain to have the controls and rules that enable us to manage the flows of people coming into the UK.

The hon. Lady mentioned people smugglers and the impact of bombing. Although we obviously hope that the ceasefire holds, it is important for us not to take steps that would simply play into the hands of the criminals who are gaining from the crisis, and that is why we have taken the approach that we have.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): I, too, am proud of the leading role in the provision of aid for refugees that the United Kingdom has played, not just over the last few months but for many years. What requests has Greece made directly to the UK for help? I know that the UK has been seeking a comprehensive EU response for months, but what more can we do to put pressure on the rest of the EU to help with the daily basic needs of the refugees in Greece, and at least try to alleviate some of the burden?

Justine Greening: We have humanitarian advisers in Greece who have been helping to ensure that the Greek strategy, including the way in which camps are being set up, is as effective as possible. We have also worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. More recently, we have helped to provide child protection officers. The situation on the ground is complex, but I think we should recognise that the UK has helped to provide not only life-saving and core humanitarian support, but the technical assistance that can help the Greek authorities to do a more effective job themselves. I agree that it is welcome that the European Union is now responding with additional resources to mirror the kind of work that the UK has been doing, because that support has been badly needed.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State agree that the very last thing that families fleeing beheadings, bombs and barbarism need is to face barbed wire, tear gas and rubber bullets on their arrival in the EU? Will she please, as a matter of urgency, urge her Government to take a much more constructive role within Europe and to help to implement the EU action plan on migration?

Justine Greening: We are taking a constructive, proactive approach within the European Union. We are not part of the Schengen area, but that does not prevent us from clearly setting out our views on a more effective way of dealing with this crisis. Speaking in my capacity as Secretary of State for International Development, I think that one of the most important elements to that response has been to tackle the root cause of what is making people feel that they have no alternative to putting their lives in the hands of the people smugglers. That involves doing a better job of supporting those people in the region, closer to home and closer to their families.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): We certainly welcome the financial commitments that the UK Government have announced and are already providing. I echo the calls for the rest of the international community to match those commitments, but the fact is that no amount of money will ever provide enough schools, hospitals and homes to enable the 4 million-plus refugees to settle permanently in the small number of countries that the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) mentioned earlier, given that those countries are already looking after millions of refugees.

Information from Eurostat shows that, relative to the population of each country, Greece receives twice as many asylum applications as the United Kingdom, while Italy receives two and half times the number and the EU as a whole receives five times the number. Some countries, such as Hungary and Sweden, received 30 times as many asylum applications as the United Kingdom does. Does the Secretary of State agree that those figures destroy once and for all the myth that the refugee camps are full of people whose chosen destination is the United Kingdom?

Justine Greening: On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, we have an ambition to get every Syrian child who is missing school because of this crisis back into school by the end of the forthcoming academic year. One of the key outcomes of the London conference on Syria was to get the funding for those plans. We know that we can achieve this because we have already helped half the children to get back into school. We now need to finish the job. More broadly, he talked about the intentions of refugees arriving in the EU. The reality is that there are large Syrian diasporas in Germany and Sweden, and many of the people arriving on the shores of Greece might want to join their families in those countries. In the end, however, we need a more co-ordinated approach that recognises that countries such as the UK are not in the Schengen area and that we want to take our own decisions. There is no getting away from the fact that as a last resort people are putting themselves in the hands of people smugglers, but their first choice is almost always to stay in the region. Following the Syria conference in London, we need more action taken internationally to deliver on that.
Points of Order

2.12 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will recall that on 2 December last year, the Prime Minister came to the House and sought permission to extend into Syria the RAF airstrikes that were taking place in Iraq. In the motion, he undertook to provide quarterly progress reports to set out the impact of the strikes on Daesh’s finances, its fighters and its weapons. The basis on which the support of the House was given was that we would receive those regular updates, which would also tell us whether there had been any UK involvement in civilian casualties. A quarter has now elapsed since 2 December, and I seek your guidance as to whether the Prime Minister has sought to provide such a progress report to the House and, if not, what action I could take to ensure that he does.

Mr Speaker: A very brief, and I hope accurate, mental calculation suggests to me that there have been 101 days since the date to which the right hon. Gentleman refers. It is perfectly possible that the Government are contemplating such a statement, and if they are not doing so, it is possible that they might do so as soon as the news of his point of order wings its way towards the relevant departmental Minister, or even to the Prime Minister himself. If that transpires not to be the case, the right hon. Gentleman is a very experienced Member and a former Deputy Leader of the House and he will be well aware that he could pursue the matter at business questions, for example, or through the use, on other days beyond today, of the device that can help to secure a ministerial presence. Knowing him as I do, I know that he will utilise all the weapons at his disposal.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: The day would not be complete without hearing a point of order from the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke).

Alec Shelbrooke: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your support and advice. You will know that last week we had an important urgent question about mental health, and you will recall that when I asked a question on that occasion, I commented on the fact that the writers of “Coronation Street” had done a great service to those with mental health issues by addressing the stigma and other relevant issues. It will not have escaped your notice that the creator and original writer of “Coronation Street”, Mr Tony Warren, has sadly passed away at the age of 79. Is there any way in which it could be noted, through you in the Chair, that the contribution to society as well as to entertainment of great pioneers such as Tony Warren has led to a great improvement in British culture and a greater understanding of our country?

Mr Speaker: My feeling is that the hon. Gentleman has found his own salvation. He has achieved his mission. Moreover, he knows that he has done so. No real contribution from me is required, other than to acknowledge that he has paid fulsome and gracious tribute to someone who proved to be a change-maker. I am sorry to learn of that gentleman’s passing, but he has been honoured by the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell today.

Employment Status (Review)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.16 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the establishment by the Secretary of State of an independent review of the operation of the Employment Rights Act 1996 in relation to the determination of employment status and dispute resolution mechanisms for employers and employees relating thereto; and for connected purposes.

My Bill calls for something that is long overdue: a full, independent review into the law surrounding self-employed workers and their rights. The need for this was demonstrated by the collapse of City Link in my constituency and those of other Members. The delivery firm went into administration just over a year ago, with employees being informed on Christmas day 2014. Roughly 2,700 people, along with 1,000 contractors, lost their jobs. Those contractors, and the situation that was forced upon them, form the inspiration for this Bill.

A number of concerns were expressed about City Link’s collapse and about how it might have been handled better. It provoked a joint report from the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee and the Scottish Affairs Committee—a report on the impact on employment of the closure of City Link was published in March 2015. City Link viewed its drivers as self-employed. The drivers provided their own vans, but were required to wear the company’s livery and were not permitted to work for anyone else. Those drivers were employees in all but name.

The Business, Innovation and Skills Committee stated:

“Contractors and sub-contractors providing drivers for City Link have been hit particularly hard by its closure.”

That is because they were unsecured creditors and were unlikely to receive the vast majority of the wages they were owed. The administrators’ statement of proposals found that they could expect to receive less than 2p in the pound. The Select Committee further noted that the financial difficulties of the contractors were worsened by the fact that they had been encouraged to take on additional staff and vehicles and to work longer hours in the lead-up to Christmas, despite the doubts over the company’s future. Gordon Martin, of the RMT, told the Committee that, due to assurances from City Link:

“People, through the business, went out and bought additional vans to put on the road. This is a human tragedy across the piece. People are thousands of pounds in debt. Who knows how they are going to pay?”

That context is important in outlining the vulnerable position subcontractors can be in when a company goes into administration. The underlying issue here that I wish to raise is bogus “self-employment”. The RMT told the Committee that the self-employed drivers were “tied to the company; they have to wear the uniform and they have to use the company livery on the vehicles…That is the way the market is, unfortunately, but they are employees by any definition, other than the fact that they have an arrangement in place where they seem to be divorced from the company but are employed by it.”
Crucially, the Select Committee accepted the RMT’s analysis that this was direct employment in everything but name.

Why does this matter? All rights under employment law are contingent on employment status, be it as an employee, worker or someone self-employed. The self-employed have few rights. They are not entitled to receive sick pay, holiday pay or the national minimum wage, and are responsible for their own taxation. Workers have a number of basic rights, including the right to the minimum wage and annual leave. Employees have the same rights as workers, plus additional rights, including the right not to be unfairly dismissed and the right to redundancy pay. An employee is an individual who works under a contract of employment, which means that employment rights turn on whether or not the contract under which a person works is a contract of employment.

Self-employed persons are instead regarded in law as providing a service for a customer or client. The distinction is often described as the difference between a “contract of service” and a “contract for services”. The question that needs addressing is how to make sure that people are on the type of contract that accurately reflects their work. I am not in any way opposed to people being self-employed—I am sure that in many situations it is extremely useful. What I object to is people being denied the right type of contract for their work and therefore not getting the employment rights to which they should be entitled. The difficulty is: how does someone know whether they are on the right type of contract? The Select Committee found that these drivers were employees in all but name, but that is no consolation to those affected. It should not be so difficult to determine whether a contract is an employment contract or not, or for someone to find out whether they are on the appropriate contract for their work.

Bogus self-employment is when an individual is treated by a company as being self-employed but their relationship with the company exhibits the features of an employment relationship. If the company says the individual is self-employed and the individual says he is actually an employee, there is only one way to settle the issue and that is by going to court. A contractor who wishes to challenge their employment status has to go to court, which is both arduous and expensive. Furthermore, the question of employment status is one of the issues most widely litigated on in employment law.

The House of Commons Library has kindly supported me in understanding the legal tests developed by courts and tribunals. Substantial criteria are involved, each of which is subject to volumes of case law, and this level of complexity in the law worsens the problem. An individual might suspect that he is an employee but would be unlikely to know whether or not he is, because the law is so complex. That means that some companies may be wrongly categorising employees as self-employed persons, depriving them of employment rights.

At the time of the City Link collapse I met the then Business Secretary, who, to his credit, was aware of this difficulty. Let me quote at length what he told the Select Committee:

“Before the City Link issue came up, I had initiated a thorough investigation of employment status, which we are now undertaking…there is what appears to be a growing number of people who are not genuinely self-employed but have, in some sense, fallen through the cracks. We are trying at the moment to get a handle on…how, at least through legislation, we might address that problem. We certainly acknowledge that it exists. It is a part of this wider debate…I would hope my successor, whoever it is, takes this seriously, because there is a gap.”

He then announced the review in October 2014. It appears that this review is internal, and we still do not know the outcome. In March 2015, in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), the then Minister responded by saying that “a number of teams from across the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills have been feeding into the employment status review.”

Yet, in answer to a parliamentary question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) only this month, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said that “officials from HM Treasury, HM Revenue and Customs, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will form a Cross Government Working Group for Employment Status early this year.”

I can only ask this: what have they been doing for the past year?

It is time for a proper review, led by experts in employment law, and I suggest that a leading employment lawyer is appointed to chair the review. We need greater clarity as to the criteria for “self-employment”. We need a forum where individuals can query or challenge their employment status without having to go to court, and I suggest that an ombudsman or a Government agency might be appropriate. We need penalties for companies that intentionally use bogus self-employment contracts, and we need to give full consideration to whether the rights and support we provide to the self-employed are adequate in today’s world.

Question put and agreed to.
Ordered.
That Mr Jim Cunningham, Chris Stephens, Colleen Fletcher, Mr Geoffrey Robinson, Mr Dennis Skinner and Steve McCabe present the Bill.
Mr Jim Cunningham accordingly presented the Bill.
Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March, and to be printed (Bill 146).
Estimates Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

ESTIMATES 2015-16

DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

The Science Budget


Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2016, for expenditure by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills:

(1) the resources authorised for use for current purposes be reduced by £7,152,214,000 as set out in HC 747,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £195,006,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £72,412,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—[Margot James.]

2.28 pm

Nicola Blackwood (Oxford West and Abingdon) (Con): We hold a position of great responsibility in the global scientific community; as a science powerhouse, not only do we set the bar for the quality of research, but we have a duty to take care that our spending and structural decisions do more than merely maintain the status quo. As we face down a century that is filled with infinitely complex societal challenges—ageing, chronic and complex illnesses and climate change—we have to acknowledge that we are in the hot seat. Our scientists and innovators in academia and industry will be at the forefront of the discoveries that will not only underpin the productivity in our economy, but ensure the sustainability of our way of life.

If we get our spending priorities, regulatory frameworks and immigration policy wrong, we will be on the wrong side of history. For that reason, the Science and Technology Committee chose spending on science and innovation as our first inquiry and ensured that we reported in time to make recommendations ahead of the spending review. It is also why we asked for this debate today, ahead of the Budget, to press on recommendations that have not yet been taken up, although we are grateful for the Government’s response.

Our findings received widespread support. The Times and the Financial Times published editorials endorsing our call to increase R and D investment. Sir Paul Nurse, president of the Royal Society, joined scientists up and down the country when he said that our report “hits the nail squarely on the head.”

The evidence that we received was clear:

“We punch well above our weight” in science and innovation.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, my constituency houses one of the centres for fusion technology. In the context of her remarks, I wonder what she has recommended in relation to taking that forward and helping to develop it.

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to be proud of the Culham Centre for Fusion Energy. I have visited it on more than one occasion. One of the fundamental proposals that we have made is to increase R and D investment in the UK. If he will listen a little further, he will hear exactly what we have proposed to ensure that the UK remains a world leader in that particular area of research.

With just 0.9% of the world’s population and 3.2% of the world’s R and D spending, we produce 16% of the world’s most cited papers and hold more than 10% of the world’s patents. We have produced 80 Nobel laureates. We have four of the world’s top six universities—I will, if I may, boast that one of them is in my constituency—and we attract more inward investment for research than any other part of Europe. However, it is not enough to be proud of the exceptional impact of our research base; we must also be mindful of the pivotal role that it plays in the goals that we have set ourselves as a nation.

As a Committee, we welcomed the Chancellor’s statement protecting the science budget in real terms, increasing the annual capital budget to £1.1 billion and maintaining the innovation budget at flat cash—albeit with £165 million becoming loans. We are also grateful to the Business Secretary, who gave evidence to the Committee in January, for reassuring us that not only would the ring fence for the science budget remain, but no additional organisations, programmes or spending lines could be added to that budget.

Although we welcomed that assurance, we would like to see those allocations for ourselves. The Business Secretary assured us that those allocations would be finalised in mid-February; it is now March and I am told that the negotiations are still ongoing. Will the Minister please tell the House what the hold-up is, and exactly when those allocations will be made public?

We are concerned that as excellent as our research base is, commercialisation, though improving, remains sub-optimal. Crucially, despite the recent spending settlement, UK investment in R and D is internationally low at a time when our competitors are increasing R and D investment.

At 1.7% of GDP, the UK remains 12th among 28 member states for R and D investment; in 2013, Germany invested about 3%, China about 2%, and Israel and Korea about 4.2%. There is a reason why all our competitors are increasing their R and D while we lag behind. It is that R and D investment is proven to increase productivity and innovation growth. Science and innovation spending is not a subsidy, but a strategic investment that creates jobs, increases productivity and attracts inward investment.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that research, pure research and discovering inventions often lead to some of the greatest creations? There were decades between the discovery of the electron and when we were able to use it, but it now runs every part of our lives today.

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I often like to quote Lord Porter, who says that there are only two kinds of research: that which has been exploited and that which has yet to be exploited. That is why we must ensure that the entire pipeline from fundamental research all the way through to commercialisation is working at peak capacity.
We must be mindful of the fact that, between 2000 and 2008, 51% of productivity growth came from innovation. We know that Government investment in research crowds in private sector investment, because the latest BIS analysis tells us so. It shows that £1 of public investment will increase private funding by between £1.13 and £1.60. It shows that firms that persistently invest in R and D have 13% higher productivity than those that do not. It shows that every £1 of public investment in R and D raises private sector R and D productivity by 20p each year in perpetuity.

Our top recommendation to Government was to produce a long-term road map to increase public and private R and D investment up to the 3% EU target. That would sit well alongside the national innovation plan, which I understand the Business Secretary is proposing. We are not alone in calling for that increase; other Select Committees and institutions have done so before us. In fact, it was BIS’s own analysis in 2014 that called for the UK to increase R and D investment up to 2.9%, which is the average of our competitors, commenting that those competitors do not appear to get poor returns on their investments.

If the evidence is so compelling, what would such a road map look like? Based on international analysis, if the UK were to invest 3% of GDP in R and D, we would expect a third of that to come from public spending. Policies and the road map would need to be a combination of increasing Government R and D and stimulating private sector investment beyond the lifetime of this Parliament. Although protecting the science budget proper and the ring fence in this Parliament is a good start, we also believe that the policies need to protect the departmental R and D and to make it more transparent and necessary. Departmental R and D has plummeted in some Departments in the past decades; reversing that trend can only lead to better government and will also create all the virtuous effects that we saw in the previous Parliament.

We also need to target private sector investments to scale-ups. The UK has become a country with lots of start-ups, but not enough companies make it through the so-called “mid-cap gap” to become £1 billion valuation quoted companies. Incentives for early-stage investors to build and stay in companies are needed. Options might include increasing the enterprise investment scheme threshold to cover £100 million companies.

There could also be incentives for investors to hold on to eligible research-intensive companies for longer and not to sell them. Those incentives could include reintroducing the capital gains tax taper relief to reward 10 to 15-year exits from investments in such companies. There could also be incentives for pension and institutional fund investors to invest in research-intensive companies, as they tend to have a longer term outlook. A programme such as a capital gains tax break on the dividend returns for funds in proportion to the percentage of the fund that is invested in a research-intensive company might be an option.

We could also look to our immigration policy for possible opportunities. Tier 1 investor visas require individuals to invest £2 million in the UK for the duration of their stay. The Migration Advisory Committee has recommended that those sums should be invested in the public good, such as in hospitals and schools. There is an opportunity here to assemble a portfolio of investment for research to meet that criterion so that our science, technology, engineering and maths ecosystem could benefit from that investment.

The immigration skills charge is a final option that we could propose. We urge the Minister to consider an exemption for the STEM PhD-level certificate of sponsorship from the immigration skills charge. That would boost the STEM PhD employers. Furthermore, PhD-level exemptions already exist in the visa system in recognition of the need to recruit for these posts from the best in the world.

Those ideas are just a starting point, but our message is clear: we believe that increasing UK R and D investment to a competitive level needs to be a matter of national priority, and a long-term road map is the right mechanism to achieve it. Getting the science spending right is about not just how much we spend, but how we spend it.

We also received worrying evidence that not all of our capital projects were operating at full capacity due to inadequate resource allocations. The ISIS neutron source worth £400 million at Harwell is operating for only about 128 days instead of an optimal 180 days due to insufficient operational costs. Similar problems were reported elsewhere, including in the Catapult network. Although we welcome the Government’s commitment to the Catapult network, which is working well, we urge them to consolidate and fully fund the existing network before expanding it. It is simply wasteful not to ensure that we are putting enough resource into the system so that we can realise the full value from all capital investments. That is why we called for a review of all capital and resource allocations to ensure that all future capital investments are allocated the resource necessary fully “to sweat our assets”.

The Business Secretary accepted that problem when he appeared before us, and he assured us that a review was under way to ensure that the situation did not happen again. He committed to send the Committee the results of that review, but we have not received them, so I hope that the Minister can update us on progress today.

The Business Secretary identified France and Finland as the inspiration for the introduction of innovation loans. The Committee would be interested to hear what metrics the Government used to conclude that loans were effective for stimulating innovation. We understand that the Government intend to pilot this scheme. As a Committee, we can only commend a scientific approach to measuring the impacts of different types of instruments before settling on a specific grants/loan mix, if that is the intention, but it would be helpful to hear from the Minister at the outset what hard evidence there already is on which financial instruments work best and what his plans are to build on that evidence before introducing such loans.

Finally, we were crystal clear that on no account must the Government’s proposals for reorganisation of the research councils and higher education undermine the dual funding system or the Haldane principle. In his evidence to the Committee, the Secretary of State said that there would be one response from Government covering Dowling, Nurse and the higher education Green Paper. He could not give us a timeline for that response. However, given the far-reaching impact of these proposals and the current uncertainty surrounding the Government’s intentions, I hope the Minister can be a little more
Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee. The manner in which she is steering that Committee towards practical added-value recommendations is exemplary and superb, and the manner in which she steered the House through her recommendations this afternoon was astonishingly good. I am in the weird position of agreeing with every word she said, so I will not take too much of the House’s time.

The hon. Lady was particularly strong, if I may say so, when she spoke about what a pivotal role science plays in future economic and productivity growth, and given my Select Committee’s priorities, I was particularly interested in her point about start-ups. It is relatively easy to start a business in this country, but scaling that up so that we have very large, innovative and successful firms employing a large number of people is a major challenge for this Parliament. I hope that our two Select Committees can work together closely to provide the join-up that is needed.

The hon. Lady mentioned that science has never been more crucial to our status as a modern economic nation. I agree. We need innovative and successful firms creating wealth and employment on the back of science and research and development. We are here now, in the 21st century, on the cusp of the fourth industrial revolution: the first, in the 18th century, used water and steam power to mechanise production; the second, in the early 20th century, used electric power to create mass production; the third, in the late 20th century, used electronics and information technology to automate production, unleash digital and revolutionise the means of communication.

This fourth industrial revolution, moving at an exponential pace, is astonishing. The technologies that this revolution is unleashing, such as the internet of things, autonomous vehicles, materials science, nanotechnology, biotechnology, energy storage, artificial intelligence and quantum computing, will disrupt almost every industry in almost every country, and will disrupt society as a whole. Science and technology are the foundations of this revolution, and the choice in the future will be stark. Countries that embrace and invest in science will be the winning nations of the future; those that do not will fall behind in economic growth and living standards.

This is why, as the hon. Lady pointed out, it is a matter of concern that we have lagged behind spend by our competitors on science and research and development for much of the past 30 years. As she said, what we do spend, we seem to spend very efficiently and effectively. We punch well above our weight, but we need to think about the volume of that value, as well as what we are doing with it. We have spent just over 2% of GDP on R and D just once in the past 30 years. That was in 1986, and we have never again reached that level. Spend has declined steadily over that period to reach a long-term average of about 1.6% or 1.7% of our GDP. We are below the EU average for R and D spend as a proportion of our economy.

The Russell Group has pointed out that in terms of the level of R and D intensity of the top 22 countries listed by the OECD, the UK has the lowest level of investment. Our investment has declined, while our competitors such as Korea, Germany, the US and even Japan have increased the share of their economy spent on research and development. As is mentioned in the hon. Lady’s report, Imperial College London has said that our investment as a proportion of GDP is about 1.72%, but China increased its share of R and D investment from 1.3% in 2005 to 1.98%; France increased...
its share from 2.11% in 2005 to 2.26% in 2012; and Germany increased its share from 2.51% in 2005 to 2.92% in 2012. The US also increased its investment in the same period from 2.51% of GDP to 2.79%. Imperial College, giving evidence to the hon. Lady’s Select Committee, said that the choice was stark:

“Without increased investment in R&D, therefore, the UK risks losing its position at the forefront of research globally, particularly given the rapid rate of advance in scientific research and the intense levels of international competition.”

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend concerned that where the Government attempt to support innovation and R and D, the resources are very unevenly distributed? For example, from the Catapult programme, 9% of resources have gone to the midlands region, but 46% have gone to London and 22% to the south-east. Surely that is not the way to get the best out of the country.

Mr Wright: My hon. Friend makes an important point. If we are spending a pound of public money, what do we want to get out of that and where do we get most bang for our buck? If the Government are serious about rebalancing the economy and making sure that prosperity is not just in London and the south-east but spread across the country, projects such as the midlands engine and the northern powerhouse need to have that scientific base in order to boost investment, research and development, and ultimately wealth creation as well.

The Russell Group has stated:

“The UK punches above its weight when it comes to excellence in research and higher education but this situation is unsustainable in the long-run without continued investment...The UK lags behind its main competitors in its level of investment in R&D and cannot continue to sustain its position as a world-leader without sufficient support.”

The EU has stated that to maintain future competitiveness in the face of unprecedented global competition, member states should be working towards spending 3% of GDP on research and development by 2020. As the hon. Lady said, the UK is a long way from that target. Only Finland, Sweden and Denmark already exceed that 3% target, yet it is vital for future productivity gains.

The hon. Lady and her Committee thought that the science issue was so important that it should be the focus of their first inquiry. We in the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee thought that the Government’s productivity plan, published in July 2015, was so important—indeed, the productivity gap is the major economic challenge of this Parliament—that we made it the focus of our first inquiry. We looked at spending on research and development and found that publicly funded R and D creates a strong “multiplier effect” and “crowds-in” private sector, charitable and inward investment, stimulating around 30% more self-investment from industry.

Throughout our inquiry we heard strong evidence about just how much the public spending on R and D can draw in that private spend, as opposed to crowding it out. That model is operated by our major competitors around the world. Our report stated:

“We fully agree with the Science and Technology Committee’s recommendations on maintaining good R&D investment in the UK and echo that, if the Government is serious about productivity and competitiveness, it needs to commit to a total level of public and private R&D investment in the United Kingdom of three per cent of Gross Domestic Product. We therefore recommend that the Government produces a ‘roadmap’ for increasing the total level of public and private R&D investment in the United Kingdom to three per cent of Gross Domestic Product.”

The hon. Lady also mentioned the move from grants to loans. I worry about that, because it is a major concern. Decisions on capital investment are global, often decided by people around boardroom tables that are not in the UK, and it can be transferred anywhere. Those multinational corporations will be looking at a different dashboard of metrics when deciding where to put their latest investment. They will be looking at the flexibility of the labour market, tax rates and the ease of doing business. They will also be looking at the collaboration and partnerships between public and private, particularly in terms of R and D.

Other countries provide help and support to land that investment, and for the past 15 years we have had a major strength in that. The level of foreign direct investment into the United Kingdom has been excellent, but I think that we will put that at risk by moving from grants to loans. For example, why would Rolls-Royce invest in a factory here when Singapore, where the company already has a presence, could be offering a whole lot more? It is a case of making sure that we do not compromise our true strengths when it comes to grants and loans. Therefore, echoing what the hon. Lady said, what is the rationale for that? Is the Minister not aware that there is a huge risk in moving from grants to loans? What metrics will he use to advance this? Can we pilot it before it is rolled out across the economy?

The second risk that I would like to talk about is the proposal to merge Innovate UK and Research UK. The Catapult centres are working well, but they are relatively new organisations and they need a period of stability and certainty to become embedded in the ecosystem of science research and innovation. The merger will cause disruption and uncertainty and it will affect our science base. Will the Minister therefore outline for the House what the roadmap is to ensure that Innovate UK and Research UK can come together in a safe way?

The Business, Innovation and Skills Committee fully agrees with the Government on the need to improve productivity; we want to focus on that throughout our inquiries in this Parliament. Part of that is being able to spend for the long term and prioritising capital spend. Under the coalition Government, BIS’s capital departmental expenditure limits rose by about 84%, but under the spending review announced by the Chancellor two or three months ago it will fall by about 60%. The spending review stated quite explicitly:

“The government has chosen to prioritise its day to day spending on national security and key public services while investing more for the long term in capital infrastructure.”

The Government’s capital investment over the lifetime of this Parliament actually increases by about £12 billion, but BIS’s capital spend is being cut by 60%. The Ministry of Defence’s capital spend will increase, as will the capital spend of the Department for Communities and Local Government—a comparably sized Department—because of housing. The Department for Transport’s capital spend will double to £12 billion.

In contrast, the science budget will bob around throughout this Parliament at about £1.1 billion a year. I do not see that as a huge success. Actually, I see it as a failure in negotiations by BIS during the spending review, especially given that, as the Chancellor has said, science is a major priority for this Government. Since 2010 we
have lost around £330 million in capital spend on science. It will take an awful lot of investment and prioritising to catch up, given that our competitors are moving ever further away. Therefore, does the Minister think that that was a disappointing negotiation? Given the priority and the pivotal role that science plays, does he think that we should be spending more on science in order to boost that long-term value for the economy?

Given the central importance of science as perhaps the principal driver of future economic growth, increased competitiveness and improved living standards, the relative decline in our science spend, regardless of whether we spend it wisely, should be a cause of enormous concern, and there should be a determination at a national level to reverse it. That is why I am really pleased that the hon. Lady has brought forward this debate. I hope that the Minister will respond positively to ensure that science is at the heart of our economic revival, now and in the future.

2.57 pm

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): This is a vital debate because it is about the future direction of our nation, and whether we will truly commit to the high-value, high-skills economy and invest in the areas that underpin that aspiration, such as core scientific research, or whether we will pay lip service to that aim while actually spending most of our energies maintaining the status quo. I suppose the reality will be a bit of both, but on this occasion I am pleased that the Government’s actions appear to be working towards backing up the aspiration. That is why I want to place on the record my thanks to the Chancellor and to the Minister for the announcement in the recent spending review of a real-terms increase in spending on science.

I was fortunate enough to be a member of the Science and Technology Committee in the previous Parliament. Indeed, I wanted to chair the Committee in this Parliament, but unfortunately that was not to be; my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood) was successful, and I wish her and the Committee well in the coming years. Back in 2010 the Committee was very pleased that there was a flat cash settlement and a ring fence for the science budget. At the time, that seemed an excellent outcome, compared with the cuts being experienced by other Departments. Of course, the inflationary effect of that flat cash settlement was that by 2015 it had effectively dropped by 15%.

Therefore, the announcement of a real-terms, year-on-year increase in this Parliament was particularly welcome. As the Minister will recall stating:

“We are protecting science resource funding in real terms, at its current level £4.7 billion for the rest of the Parliament.”

That, along with the £6.9 billion science capital commitment, means a total investment of over £30 billion in science by 2020. That has to be welcomed by all, I believe that it sends a clear signal that science and innovation are at the heart of the Government’s long-term economic plans.

We know that Britain is a great place to do science. As we have heard from my hon. Friend, for every pound invested, we publish more papers and receive more citations than any other developed nation. We perform well above the average, producing 16% of top-quality published research findings, with just 3.2% of the world’s R and D expenditure.

How has that come to be the case, and how do we maintain it? There are a number of things that we have done in the past and that we are doing now. As a nation, we have a long and illustrious history of scientific endeavour, and we have made numerous significant scientific breakthroughs, as we heard from the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee. We have created a scientific landscape that fosters creativity and an ability to think the unconventional and then go out and explore it. While money is important, therefore, this is not all about the cash; it is more about how it is used and how we direct—or do not direct—the way in which it is spent.

This Government and previous Governments have built on the achievements of the past for the benefit of our collective future. In the recent Russell Group report “Engines of growth”, a sample of 240 projects from the group’s universities delivered at least £21 billion of economic benefit—a hundredfold return on investment. That proves that public investment in R and D supports economic growth. However, that investment must be free from political interference, as enshrined in the Haldane principle—the idea that decisions about what to spend research funds on should be made by researchers, rather than politicians. That must continue.

It is right for the Government to support science, but they must not become too prescriptive or they will kill the very creativity that allows us to punch well above our weight. At present, the Government are getting it about right. Investing in Catapult centres is an excellent example of how the Government can give researchers a steer, without direct interference, and I hope that that will continue. It is right that we put up the money, but it is also right that it is the scientists who decide how it is spent.

We have an excellent record of investment in science in this country, but I want to highlight one or two things. The relationship between Parliament and the science community is as good as it has ever been. Yesterday we saw an excellent event—Voice of the Future—at which the Minister spoke. As part of that elaboration between the Royal Society, the Royal Academy, the Science and Technology Committee, young and early-career scientists were invited into Parliament to quiz those responsible for directing how Parliament and science interact. Another example of that relationship will come next week, when I host SET for BRITAIN—the science, engineering and technology for Britain competition—where young and early-career scientists will have an opportunity to highlight their work at a poster competition, with the potential to receive significant recognition and prizes.

As I said, the landscape for science looks good in the UK, and the Government are showing genuine support, but I cannot let this opportunity pass without highlighting one or two areas that still need addressing. As was highlighted in both previous contributions, the amount we spend on science in the UK is well below what our international partners spend. We are the fifth largest economy in the world, but all the other major economies are spending considerably more than us. We can take a simple step towards rectifying that by aiming to spend 0.7% of our GDP on R and D by 2020, rather spending 0.5%. That is a figure we have committed to spend in
other areas, and we could certainly commit to spend it on science. We know that that makes sense, and we have seen how we get a return on that investment. I would like the Government and the Minister to take that thought away.

My final point is about how we inspire the next generation of scientists. In a recent report, the Royal Society identified a skills gap, noting that we will need 1 million new engineers, scientists and tech professionals by 2020. The Government are doing something through their apprenticeship programme to help fill that gap, but we need to do more to inspire young people to see science as a career for them. One way we could do that is by getting the Government to facilitate greater working between schools, the learned societies, the professional bodies and STEM businesses, so that we can take real-life examples of how science works in society into our educational establishments and inspire young people about science at an earlier age.

The settlement goes a long way towards ensuring that we continue to be an economic and scientific powerhouse, and I commend the Government for their actions.

3.5 pm

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): We meet for this debate at an auspicious moment. According to this morning’s Financial Times,

“Grey hairs, monocrows and poorly judged comb-overs could be consigned to history after research led by British scientists revealed how our genes affect hair growth on the human head and face.”

That, if evidence were needed, is a sign of the continuing health of British science. However, it takes funding for British basic science to produce publications that can, in time, lead to the wealth-creating, job-generating businesses of the future. I am, therefore, broadly supportive of the Government’s continuing commitment to the science budget, but there is much more we can do when it comes to Government support for science, for knowledge transfer and for greater private sector involvement in R and D.

First, however, let me set out some history. When the last Labour Government came to power in 1997—happy days—we found, as we always do, that the Conservative party had decimated the British science base. Laboratories were falling apart, basic funding was slashed, support for R and D was pathetic, and the space programme was in chaos—the usual. Over 13 years, primarily under the leadership of Science Minister Lord Sainsbury, and with the support of Chancellor Gordon Brown and investment from the Wellcome Trust, the Labour party rebuilt Britain’s science base.

The UK innovation investment fund was created to back technology entrepreneurs, the science research investment fund was created to tackle the backlog of under-investment in facilities, and the higher education innovation fund was created to incentivise universities to transfer their knowledge into industry. The result has been a golden age for British science, with great discoveries such as the Higgs boson; the Rosetta mission; an end to the brain drain; and world-class, well-resourced universities carrying out cutting-edge work.

Mr Iain Wright: My hon. Friend makes a really important point, and the work Lord Drayson did was absolutely instrumental in those achievements. Does my hon. Friend agree that that 10-year science plan gave all institutions and companies the time they needed to invest with certainty and confidence, because the ecosystem was steady for the entire decade?

Tristram Hunt: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. The Science and Technology Committee report makes a point about the innovation lag, and the investment my hon. Friend talks about yielded extraordinary results afterwards. So successful was the Labour party’s science policy that the pressure group Save British Science had to go into liquidation—its work was done.

When the coalition Government came to power, they ring-fenced a flat-cash science budget. They cut the capital budget by 40% and then reversed the cut. Those were not the long-term, sustainable decisions our science base needs. Today we have heard that the capital part of the science budget stands at £1.1 billion a year, and that will be protected in real terms until 2021. However, I share the Science and Technology Committee’s concern about the UK falling behind our competitors in R and D investment. I agree with the Committee’s plans for a road map to take us towards R and D investment of 3% of GDP and up to the Euro norm. I agree very much with the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood) that spending on science is not a subsidy but an investment.

This limited debate offers us a broader opportunity to think about the role of the state in creating the wealth of tomorrow. A decent science policy should set out how a supportive, collaborative and inventive state can generate not only the basic science, but the knowledge transfer and institutions for innovation that are fundamental to a high-wage, high-skill economy. Wages for jobs in the knowledge economy are higher—in 2013, they were in fact 40% higher. If the knowledge economy made up one third of jobs in Britain, we would create an extra 2.4 million better-paid jobs.

While the Business Secretary is a market fundamentalist and a minimalist-state zealot—my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) spelled out brilliantly the failure of his negotiation strategies—and the Chancellor is eyeing up further spending cuts, I am very glad that the Science Minister has outranked himself as a supporter of Mariana Mazzucato’s work on an entrepreneurial activist state. Publicly funded research and development has a strong multiplier effect in that it crowds in private sector, charitable and inward investment. We all know the stories of Stanford University and Xerox, and the National Science Foundation and Google. From hi-tech to bio-tech to nanotech to green-tech, we will succeed in these sectors only with a state committed to driving innovation, research and knowledge transfer.

Let me briefly lay out a few areas of concern. The first is how other Government Departments use their science budgets, where we have seen a real cut in terms of science expenditure. This money is not ring-fenced and there is very little strategic approach to how it is utilised. In the United States, departments use their money effectively for areas of strategic direction. We need a lot more of that across the UK Government.

Secondly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) spelled out, the Government’s regional approach to science spending is a mess. I applaud the Chancellor’s investment in Manchester—a city that likes to think it was the birthplace of the industrial revolution, when we all know that...
Josiah Wedgwood pioneered that in Stoke-on-Trent, at Etruria. But beyond the Irwell, the level of investment in regional universities and laboratories, and indeed in the Catapult centres, is pathetic. In 2013, 52% of total UK R and D expenditure was in the south-east. The Government are pump-priming the silicon tech, silicon roundabout in Old Street, and the Olympic park in the east end, but it would do much more if it supported organisations such as the Lucideon research facility on ceramics in my constituency.

Thirdly, as the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) suggested, we need to work much harder on getting young people into science and technology subjects. I wish the Government would stop pretending that careers advice does not matter and get a grip on that area. We face a crisis in getting high-quality maths teachers into high-poverty areas in order to allow young people to pursue a career in science. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool suggested, we must also do something about supporting the growth and development of technicians.

Finally, while I do not wish to intrude on internal family disputations, it is clear that our place in Europe is absolutely fundamental for the continuing support of our science base. Only this week, 50 biotech and pharmaceutical chief executives reminded us of the importance of remaining inside the European Union if our life sciences sector is to continue to grow, saying: “Not only would an exit from the EU negatively impact on the life sciences sector, but changing the current arrangement would lead to disruption, expense, and significant regulatory burdens.”

We have to make sure that we remain in a reformed European Union, but if we want to get more out of our investment into UK science, we also need much more concerted belief in, and support for, a truly entrepreneurial state.

3.13 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, following the Committee’s report on the science budget.

Members will be aware that there has always been strong evidence for the link between spending on research and development and the productivity of our economy. The UK’s economic growth depends on its ability to innovate, and investing in innovation is essential in order to strengthen the UK’s competitive advantage and maintain and grow the UK’s share of the global market.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood) said, investment in science is also an effective way to invest public money to drive economic growth. Every £1 spent by the Government on R and D increases private sector productivity by 20p per year in perpetuity. As the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills highlights in its own report, Government R and D investment leverages in for that £1 investment an average £1.36 in private investment. Government investment also provides a productive environment for research generally. For example, although Cancer Research UK does not receive any Government funding for research, it depends on Government’s investment in UK science to create a supportive environment for that research. For these reasons and many others, we on the Committee recommended that the Government produce a long-term road map for increasing public and private R and D in the UK to 3% of GDP. Businesses need as much certainty as possible when making substantial commitments to long-term investment, and a robust road map will help to deliver that.

The spending review showed that the Government have listened to concerns from the science community, with the protection of science resource funding in real terms at its current level, to increase in line with inflation for the rest of this Parliament. Members will know that this is a better deal than the flat cash settlement in 2010, which, owing to inflation, caused the real value to fall. While inflation is very low—in fact, nearly zero—it may not seem as though this is a terribly dramatic commitment, but, again, it provides economic certainty. China is going through a period of economic turmoil and the European Union is still in the doldrums, so the Government are showing that the UK is a great place to invest.

However, despite moves to deliver on the £6.9 billion commitment in the Conservative manifesto, and the stability and confidence created by the new ring-fence, investment in the science base is still low compared with that in other leading scientific nations. Fortunately, the UK science industry is rightly recognised for the superb quality of its research. While representing only 0.9% of the world population, it produces 15.9% of the top-quality research findings. A productive research environment must have Government investment in science capital and resource. However, the work is far from over. We need to do more to reap the benefits of our research in order to convert the research findings into the commercial, both for products and services. This is not an easy task to accomplish. It requires more than a protection of budgets, as was highlighted in the Dowling report. We must reduce the complexity of support systems to provide clear advice on funding, as the Government recognised and supported in their response to the Committee.

Like many, I was pleased that following the spending review, the Government will take forward the recommendations of the Nurse review of research councils, which, subject to legislation, will introduce a new body—Research UK—that will work above and across the seven existing research councils. While welcoming the Nurse review, we need to be mindful that the Dowling report highlighted how complex a system can become and the need for simplification, or “hiding the wiring”. The integration of Innovate UK and the proposed Research UK has the potential to strengthen collaboration between the research and commercial sectors but, as with everything, there must be clarification of what decisions will be made at the research council level and what decisions are to be made by the new overarching body. Long-term and stable Government investment will help to foster partnerships between industry, research organisations, charities and international partners. These relationships need the confidence that this Government are bringing by delivering economic recovery and the good deal in the science budget.

Beyond the science budget, several Government Departments finance research and development with an un-ring-fenced budget. This highlights the importance of having a chief scientific adviser for every Government Department, or at least access to one. With devolution, we ought to take the opportunity to look at other models such as that in Germany to see whether its Government structure, though different from ours, offers
any guidance. In Germany, individual states have scientific advisers. I look forward to seeing how devolution enables city regions such as Greater Manchester to take the best scientific advice and focus on supporting our fantastic universities, institutes and industries, perhaps with each city region having its own dedicated scientific adviser. There is increasing specialisation in the UK whereby every business and organisation focuses on what it does well. For example, as the UK pharmaceutical industry concentrates itself in the triangle linking Oxford, Cambridge and London, we need to recognise the importance of gaining critical mass for particular industries in other areas of the UK.

The Greater Manchester area has a fantastic history as a global player in the mass spectrometry industry, inspired by John Dalton’s work in Manchester on atomic theory in the late 18th and early 19th century. Coincidentally, that is also the industry to which I belonged before coming to this place. We are rightly proud that, in addition to our many other industries and organisations, the National Graphene Institute will make Manchester a leading centre of graphene research and commercialisation, and secure jobs for the future.

As our economy continues to strengthen, we need to ensure that our science base keeps pace with it. I am pleased that the spending review has been well received by UK scientists, but, without increased investment in R and D, the UK risks losing its position at the forefront international competition. That is why I urge the Government to create a science road map that stretches beyond the electoral cycle. A commitment to that road will give much valued certainty about investment, and ensure that our science base keeps pace with it. I am pleased that the science budget has been frozen in cash terms, leading to a real-terms drop of 10% over the last Parliament. By 2012, UK Government investment in science had fallen to an embarrassing 0.44% of GDP—less than any G8 country.

There are many physicists, engineers and technicians from the UK working at CERN, including Aidan Robson from the University of Glasgow, who was a member of the team that discovered the Higgs boson. However, when we were shown the total number of personnel, it was rather disappointing to see that there were only 900 from the UK, compared with 1,500 from Italy and 1,300 from Germany. When I asked why that was, I was told that Italy is more serious about science. A new type of particle accelerator is currently being developed at CERN, but it might be built in Japan because the Japanese Government are willing to contribute 50% of the costs. That is how a Government demonstrate that they are serious about science.

Recent work, most notably by Professor Stephen Watson at Glasgow University, has pointed to the significance of the infrastructure spend component of UK Government investment, but there is a huge mismatch between the spend for the so-called golden triangle and that for elsewhere in the UK. Infrastructure investment is known to play a key role in driving scientific discovery and, crucially, in attracting business investment. No one would deny the impressive nature of buildings such as the Crick Institute in London, and I look forward to seeing it up and running. However, such a facility means that private investment will flow into a narrow geographical area. The Government must, therefore, map out investment, both thematically and geographically—that has never been done before—to ensure that pockets of excellence are allowed to grow throughout these islands.

Chris Green: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s point about where we invest in, encourage and support science, but often the money and resources follow the expertise, so if there are great centres in a particular location, business and Government will, naturally, invest in them. The reason the Italians have a particular interest in CERN is that they have a great speciality in particle physics, which our country does not emphasise so much. We look at different areas.

Carol Monaghan: There is no reason why the UK should not be a world leader in particle physics as well. Our infrastructure and environment must allow those skills and talents to be developed.
The situation could have been so much better. As we have just been reminded by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), flat cash settlements eroded the ring-fenced, non-capital science budget by £1 billion in real terms in the previous Parliament. If we discount the introduction of the global challenges fund, which is geared to overseas development and has many strings attached, we are dealing with another flat cash settlement that will create a serious real-terms decline in funding.

The fact remains that £4.7 billion is only 0.49% of GDP, which pales in comparison with our competitor nations. The UK Government’s spending on R and D is the lowest among the G8 countries. As the Minister knows, the Royal Society has called for investment in R and D to be increased to 0.67% of GDP, to match the OECD average. The CBI has called for it to be doubled to around 1% of GDP. That is because, as the former director general of the CBI remarked last year, we are falling ever further behind our international competitors, and we must take action to ensure that we lead from the front.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I am a member of the Science and Technology Committee. Does the hon. Lady acknowledge that although those numbers, as she presents them, may not sound good, the output that we get for that funding is better than ever?

Yvonne Fovargue: I agree that the output is good, but surely that makes the case for more investment in the science budget, not less.

As the Select Committee pointed out, the UK has fallen behind its competitors in total R and D investment. If that trend is not reversed, it will put UK competitiveness, productivity and high-value jobs at risk. The Committee recommended increasing public and private R and D investment to 3% of GDP. The current position is about 1.6% of GDP. We have heard about how much less we spend than our competitor nations, and we have a serious problem of underfunding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool and the hon. Members for Oxford West and Abingdon and for Bolton West (Chris Green) have all cited compelling evidence. As they have mentioned, there is much value in using public funding to leverage private money and increase productivity, so why not commit to more funding and lever more from private industry? We are not seeing the level of industry funding for R and D that we need. I welcome the comments by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool on scaling up investment, not just start-up investment.

In their response to the Committee’s report, the Government mention Innovate UK and the Catapult network, which aims to strengthen R and D capacity and encourage innovation. I commend them for that development. As we have heard, however, £165 million of UK grants to Innovate UK for turning scientific research into commercial applications have been axed and replaced by loans. That creates additional risks for researchers and is liable to damage innovation. Both the CBI and the Federation of Small Businesses have raised concerns. I repeat the call that has been made: on what evidence has this decision been based? Do the Government believe that turning grants into loans will benefit innovation and encourage companies to invest?
On the subject of the Catapult network, why does the north of England do so badly when it comes to Innovate UK funding? The north-west did not have a single Catapult project until late last year, while Yorkshire and the Humber gets about 5% of total funding. How can that be right when the south-east gets 52% of it? As several hon. Members have said, what we need from the Government is a proper road map to outline where we are going with research and development. Let me add that any road needs to go to the north, not just stop at the M25. It is unclear what the Government are trying to achieve in the long run. What is their plan? Can they see the wisdom of increasing R and D funding as a proportion of GDP to something approaching that of our competitors? Nowhere in their response to the Committee’s report is that made clear.

As hon. Members have said, we have a lot to be proud of in this country. The UK is very good at research—we have heard many of the figures—and we in fact gain hugely in that regard from our membership of the EU, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central said so eloquently. Scientific development and innovation are critically dependent on collaborative ideas and contributions. The EU helps universities to pursue cutting-edge research. It also makes working across borders easier for UK and European researchers pooling their knowledge, infrastructure, data and resources. In fact, the UK does disproportionately well in securing EU funding. During the last period, we received €8.8 billion in direct EU funding.

We also need to ensure that the UK Government are fully behind the science research project. Flat cash settlements for R and D do not help; nor do Cabinet Office missives suggesting that scientists in receipt of Government grants should not try to influence policy. Whatever happened to the idea of evidence-based policy making? The muzzling of some of our finest minds will not help. Above all, we need a Government who have a sense of the future potential of science funding. That is why everyone has talked about the need for a road map, which is the most important missing element. Unless we have a sense of where we are going, we will fall further and further behind our competitors, instead of reaching for the stars like Major Tim Peake.

3.37 pm

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood) for her Select Committee’s important work. I will use the time available to address some of the concerns of the Science and Technology Committee and to respond to some of the points made by hon. Members.

First, it is right to remind ourselves of and to celebrate the landscape in which the Government’s plan for science and research lies. As hon. Members have mentioned, the UK’s global scientific impact far exceeds our size as a nation. With just 3.2% of the world’s R and D spend, the UK accounts for 16% of the most highly cited research articles—we have overtaken the US to rank first among comparable research nations for our field-weighted citations impact—of which we should all be extremely proud.

That is why science and research very much sit at the very heart of this Government’s economic plan. Last July, our productivity plan clearly set out how we will tackle the UK’s long-term productivity problem, with science and research being central to our proposed solutions. This autumn’s spending review settlement was an emphatic confirmation of that commitment: the extension of the ring fence around science and innovation until 2020 means a total investment of £30.4 billion during this Parliament.

The ring fence has been a powerful indication of the Government’s commitment to science, and we will continue to protect science resource funding in real terms for the rest of the Parliament. We are building on the safeguards put in place for the science budget in the last Parliament. That will mean a decade of protection and of sustained investment by the Government. All that of course comes in the context of significant savings in other areas of Government expenditure, which is a clear sign of the important place of science in our decision making.

The Science and Technology Committee has called for a road map towards a 3% R and D spend. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon knows, decisions on increases in the science spend are taken in spending reviews, when it is weighed up against the other priorities for the nation. My hon. Friend the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee also asked about allocations. We have discussed indicative allocations with our partner organisations. They are very much aware of their likely settlements, and I assure her that we will publish the allocations imminently.

My hon. Friend asked about the next steps in the implementation of the Nurse review and our thinking about the proposals we outlined in the Green Paper. As I am sure she will have appreciated, we consulted very carefully on how best to proceed, with a proper 10-week consultation. Although I understand her impatience to know how we will take all the proposals forward, it is important that we do so in a deliberative fashion and get these important decisions absolutely right. The consultation period ended only on 15 January and we will come forward with our full response in the spring.

In the meantime, I hope that I can give my hon. Friend the assurance she seeks from the Government by saying that we will maintain the spirit of the dual support system, which is so important to our research sector, alongside the continuation of the important Haldane principle, which ensures that decisions about which research to fund are taken by scientists through competitive peer review processes. To deal with her concerns about the operation of the dual support system in a bit more detail, it is possible to ring-fence or hypothecate separate funding streams, even when they are delivered through a single body. That is a model that the Government can and do use effectively, and that could ensure the continuation of the dual support system in a reshaped landscape.

The Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) raised concerns about the move from grants to loans which were echoed by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). We will market-test the proposed new financial products in the spring. We want to broaden the types of financial support that are available for innovation in this country. BIS and Innovate UK are studying the financial models that are operated by our international counterparts in respect of innovation. It is clear from
our analysis of what is going on around the world that the most successful models are increasingly emphasising other financial products in their policy mix as a supplement to their grant funding, which will always have a place.

We want to ensure that the overall funding through Innovate UK evolves and that the spectrum of products diversifies to reflect the different needs of different companies at different stages in their lifecycle. Overall funding will increase from £311 million in 2009-10 to £471 million by 2019-20. That figure includes the new finance products.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) rightly echoed the Dowling report’s recommendation that we seek greater simplification of the innovation landscape and support system. We will certainly take that core recommendation into account as we develop the thinking on our national innovation plan.

I want to emphasise three commitments in the spending review and ensure that the House understands their importance. The first is our commitment to protect science resource funding at £4.7 billion. This is the lifeblood that powers our world-leading science and research base. It funds vital blue-skies research, fuels the Bunsen burners and afterburners, and funds labs up and down the country, the research councils and the national academies, thereby making sure that Britain stays at the leading edge of global science.

At the same time, we are delivering on our manifesto commitment and investing in new commitments on a record scale, with £6.9 billion for capital expenditure. That means new research institutes and laboratories across the UK. It has been one of the greatest privileges as Science Minister to break ground on new institutions such as the imaging centre of excellence at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow. To answer the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, I hope that that demonstrates the Government’s commitment to ensuring that we fund excellent science wherever it is found in the United Kingdom.

Through our science and innovation audit, we want to encourage areas that have not received much science funding relative to other areas to come forward with proposals that we can support when we feel that they have the potential to be excellent and to do great science. We want more such proposals.

The third matter that I want to consider is the global challenges research fund. We have committed an additional £1.5 billion to the fund by 2021. It will keep the UK at the forefront of global research, leading the way on major global challenges, such as Ebola, in which we have always played a significant role. The value of the GCRF is not just what the UK can do alone. We have some of the world’s most talented scientists, most prestigious universities and most advanced laboratories, but the most significant breakthroughs in science and research are bigger than just one country.

That brings me to the points that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) made. I am glad to have his general support for all the spending review commitments that I have briefly summarised. They will give the science community the certainty that it needs for the years ahead. Like the hon. Gentleman, I recognise the important role that public sector investment in science plays in stimulating private sector investment. Other Members have already cited the crowding-in effect, which we estimate at about £1.36 for every £1 of public investment.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central is also clearly right about Europe. Science today is increasingly cross-border and collaborative. I have made my position clear, as have the Government: UK universities and our superb science base are key to our future as a knowledge economy, and we and they will be much stronger inside the EU. That is best for our research. Almost half of all UK research publications involve collaborations with other countries. Papers involving international collaboration have almost twice the citation impact of those produced by a single UK author, and EU countries are among our most crucial partners, representing nearly 50% of all our overseas collaborators.

Staying in the EU is best for our students. Our links with Europe are deep and long standing. Free movement of people makes it easier for our universities to attract the best talent, and for British students to spread their wings across the continent. Lastly, it is best for our funding. The excellence of our research base means that it is no surprise that the UK is one of the most successful players in EU research programmes.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): Is not it the case that we collaborate a great deal with the United States of America, which is not a member of the European Union? Would not any British Government want freedom of movement of expert people to our universities, whether we were in or out of the EU??

**Joseph Johnson:** My right hon. Friend is right—the partnerships are not exclusive, but why turn our back on great collaborations that benefit our science base tremendously?

The UK received £7 billion under the last framework programme, which ran from 2007 to 2013. That made us one of the largest beneficiaries of EU research funding. In this funding round, Horizon 2020, we have secured 15.4% of funds, behind only Germany on 16.5%, and with the second largest number of project participations.

As science becomes more international, we should nurture partnerships, not reject them. In the end, the British people will decide whether we are safer, stronger and better off as part of the EU, but, to thrive in a knowledge economy, there is no doubt that we need to build academic partnerships, not turn our backs on them.

3.48 pm

**Nicola Blackwood:** The debate has been not only consensual but of high quality. The Chair of the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills is right to say that we are in the middle of a fourth industrial revolution founded on science and technology and that the only sensible approach is to increase R and D investment. My hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe), who has been such an outstanding champion for science in this place, is also right to say that, as a nation, we have a long and illustrious history of scientific endeavour and we would be foolish to take any steps that undermined the proven Haldane principle on which it is built.
Relief will have swept through the corridors of both Houses at the groundbreaking news brought to us by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) that the days of the comb-over and the unibrow are numbered. My Committee colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) was right to highlight Dowling’s recommendations—they have yet to be responded to by the Government—on simplifying the aching complex science and innovation support system. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) joined other Committee members when she said that we need a more strategic approach to geographic allocation of capital investment, and I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their responses.

On the necessary deliberation and response to the Green Paper, and the fact that the consultation period only ended in January, I gently remind the Minister that the Government have chosen to respond to Dowling, the Nurse review and the Green Paper as one. Those reports came through before Christmas, and there has been quite a long delay for the scientific community in waiting for them.

As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central so eloquently said, we are in a golden age of British science. That is in no small part due to the championing by the Chancellor and successive Science Ministers, but there is no room for complacency. We must be mindful of the investment time lag, and acutely conscious that science and innovation will lie at the heart of our success as a nation. That is why I will simply restate that it is time for a step change in our investment in R and D. I call on the Government to ensure that our strategic capital investments are fully resourced so that we can sweat our assets, and I restate our key recommendation, which is the publication of a long-term road map to increase public and private R and D up to 3% of GDP. That strategic investment will create jobs, increase productivity, attract inward investment, and fund the groundbreaking discovery that is necessary to fund the great global challenges of our time.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

End of Life Care


Motion made, and Question proposed.

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2016, for expenditure by the Department of Health:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £25,869,317,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 747,

(2) the resources authorised for use for capital purposes be reduced by £945,313,000 as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £252,304,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Julian Smith.)

3.52 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The care that people receive at the end of their lives has a profound impact, not only on them but on their families and carers. All Members of the House want people to be able to access the highest quality care, irrespective of their age, diagnosis, where they live or the setting in which they are treated. We know how to deliver world-class care—indeed, we know how to deliver globally inspiring care. To start on a positive note, I should say that The Economist ranks Britain as the best in the world, from among 80 nations, for delivering end-of-life care, and we should be proud of that. The disadvantage is that that care is not available everywhere to everyone, and that is the challenge we face today.

In the 2015 report “Dying without dignity”, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman set out some starkly worrying cases of poor care that highlighted a theme, and she was clear that it is a recurring and consistent theme in her casework. For that reason, the Minister must look carefully at the themes in that report, and also at other reports that have been produced.

At the end of the previous Parliament, the Health Committee produced a report on end-of-life care, and I thank all members of that Committee, the Committee staff and our Committee specialist advisors for their valuable input, as well as the very many people and organisations from around the country who contributed.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that we must also consider the families of those children who unfortunately have very short lives? We need support for them as well, and it should be available across the country.

Dr Wollaston: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman that this care should apply irrespective of someone’s age or the setting in which they are treated. Social care will be integral to that, and I will expand further on that issue later on.
Another report the Minister will be aware of—it was commissioned by the previous Government from the Choice in End of Life Care Programme board—is “What’s Important to Me. A Review of Choice in End of Life Care”. It is now exactly a year since that report was launched. When can we see a timetable and a response to that long-awaited report?

I know other Members want to speak, so I will just touch on four key themes today: variation, communication, choice and control, and funding—including funding for social care. On variation, dying does not make equals of us. People with cancer are currently accessing about 75% of specialist palliative care. We are making great progress in that regard, but we need to make such palliative care available to people with other diagnoses. Our report touched on poor access for elderly people, particularly those with a diagnosis of dementia. The Minister will be aware of the “National Care of the Dying Audit for Hospitals,” which showed that 21% of hospital trusts are meeting National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance for providing seven-day-a-week, face-to-face specialist palliative care between the hours of nine and five. In fact, only 2% of trusts are making that care available around the clock, seven days a week. We have a long way to go.

Tackling variation means understanding where the gaps exist. The VOICES survey, which collects the views of informal carers and evaluates the services available to them, has been invaluable in setting out the issues important to those who have been bereaved and the experience of their loved ones after a bereavement. A point that has been made to me very forcefully is that we could do so much better in addressing the gaps in provision if the VOICES survey was expanded. Currently, it does not have enough power to be able to identify where there is variation around the country. Will the Minister address that point when he sums up?

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I wonder whether my hon. Friend could give me some guidance. Ideally, when should end-of-life care begin? What sort of time period are we talking about and how much uncertainty is there over the diagnosis? There are all sorts of complications: we cannot be sure whether someone is terminally ill and is going to die within a limited number of days.

Dr Wollaston: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point. It should start as soon as possible—as soon as someone receives a life-limiting diagnosis. We need to start those conversations much earlier on. We need to get better at identifying, towards the very end of life, when people are in the final stages of an illness. I will touch on that point in greater depth in a minute.

We should recognise some successes and welcome the changes made by the Care Quality Commission, in one of its thematic reviews, to prioritise end-of-life care. Does the Minister have any plans to roll out that rather successful approach in prioritising end-of-life care to out-of-hospital settings? The CQC has highlighted successfully the critical importance of leadership in improving end-of-life care, examining how having a named individual—not as a tick in a box—translates into their leading change within the hospital and identifying other individuals there who can improve the quality of care at the end of life. Recognising it as a thematic review would be very helpful in other fields.

The critical importance of training has been raised by all those who have commented. We need to provide adequate training for medical, nursing and caring staff across the board. Has the Minister had any conversations with Health Education England about what progress can be made in rolling out further training?

On communication, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) touched on, early identification will be crucial to rolling out end-of-life care to other groups beyond the traditional groups who access specialist end-of-life care. That means health professionals having the confidence and training to raise these issues at a much earlier stage and to start those difficult conversations that are too often put off.

We know that having an end-of-life care plan enables people to exercise much greater choice and control. We could go further in looking at explaining to people the differences between, for example, advance statements of wishes and advance decisions to refuse treatment. We could help people to put in place lasting powers of attorney, and nowhere is that more important than when people have been diagnosed with dementia. These conversations need, critically, to start at a much earlier point.

The sharing of communication between professionals is another issue. I know that the Minister has taken an interest in electronic care planning. When people have a life-limiting diagnosis, how can we ensure that at whatever point in the system they access care, they will not have to keep repeating their story? People’s wishes need to be understood at the earliest possible stage. We know that electronic care planning can help to reduce unnecessary hospital admissions. It is crucial for ambulance staff, for example, to have access to people’s records—with the patients’ consent, of course—so that they can be shared widely. Will the Minister update us in his summing up on what progress he has made with respect to electronic care planning and recording people’s wishes?

We can also improve communication by putting in place care co-ordinators. This point has been made to me repeatedly by people who are suffering from life-limiting illnesses. The system can sometimes appear to be terribly confusing, so allowing families to have a single point of contact to advocate on their behalf at a time when they are in distress can make a huge difference, as can having a named clinician who is taking overall responsibility for the care.

On care for people at the very end of life, the Minister will know that over the years we have much debated the Liverpool care pathway and its success. Other Members may wish to talk in greater detail about that, but emergency care treatment plans are important so that people can clearly document their wishes well in advance—not as a tick-box exercise, but as a considered exercise of having discussions with individuals and their loved ones about what their wishes are and then ensuring that they are respected. Will the Minister tell us where we are now with emergency care treatment planning?

At a time when people so often feel that they are losing control towards the end of their lives, it is vital to give people more choice and more control. That was the key theme of the so-called “Choice” review, on which I
hope the Minister will update us. Where are we now with all who need it having a “national choice offer”, as it was termed? We know that about a half of the 470,000 people who died in 2014 died in hospital, yet we know from the VOICES survey that of those who expressed a preference, only 3% wanted to be in hospital.

We are a long way from allowing people the kind of choice and control they want about where to be at the end of their lives. Most people would prefer to be at home, surrounded by their loved ones. We can do far better.

Many practical issues need to be addressed. One that I have seen first hand in my clinical experience is where families are exhausted and overwhelmed by caring responsibilities. Sometimes the individual at the heart of this will opt to go into hospital because they feel bad about the burden they feel, often wrongly, they are placing on their families. One key theme of our Health Committee report was that nobody should have to end their life in hospital for want of a social care package. That will mean being much more generous about providing free social care at the end of life, or much more rapid access to the assessments needed to allow people to continue in care, as they are sometimes very delayed. I hope the Minister will update us on that, too.

The Minister will be familiar with the work of the Nuffield Trust. Its report on the use of Marie Curie nurses, for example, pointed out that the service could save total care costs of £500 per patient and also allow many more people to be where they wanted to be at the end of their lives. Not only is the service good value for the overall health and care system, but it provides the choice and control that people desperately need and deserve at the end of their lives.

Funding lies at the heart of this issue, and it is not just a question of social care packages. I know the whole House agrees that we owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the hospice movement. Hospices play a pivotal role in outreach, providing specialist support not just for hospitals but, critically, throughout the community. Rowcroft hospice, in my constituency, is hugely valued in the community. It provides extraordinary levels of care and supplies many specialist services to the NHS to deal with—cases of lymphoedema, for instance. This week, however, it informed me that it faces a funding shortfall of £1 million next year. While about a third of its funding comes from the NHS, about 60% comes from charitable giving.

Hospices do not want to lose their link with the voluntary sector, because it is deeply embedded in the way in which they work in communities. However, it makes them rather vulnerable, because the level of charitable giving and legacies can vary greatly. What they need is a higher percentage of stable core funding to allow them to expand the important work that they do. The Minister will probably want to comment on the so-called currencies that are being developed to replace funding for palliative care. The feedback that I am receiving suggests that there is a risk that that will become a rather bureaucratic process, and there is also a worry that its implementation by clinical commissioning groups will not be compulsory. An update from the Minister would be helpful.

Will the Minister also assure us that, if the Government intend to implement all the recommendations of the “Choice” review—which I hope they do—he is satisfied that, across NHS England, the business plans that have been established will allow sufficient funding for a full implementation?

I know that other Members wish to speak. There are many other issues that I could raise, including bereavement support and research, but let me end by asking the Minister to be truly ambitious. I think that we can achieve seven-day, 24-hour access to specialist palliative care in all settings, and that we can address variation and give people choice and control at the end of their lives. It would be an extraordinary achievement for the Government to go further. We should not rest on our laurels because we are leading the world; we should say that we lead the world not just for some people, but for everyone.

4.8 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about such an important issue. Let me begin where the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) left off. I have been very impressed by what I have read. When end-of-life and palliative care in this country is at its very best, it is indeed the best in the world, which makes me proud to be British. However, it saddens me that that is not the case more widely. All the recent reports have demonstrated that access to the very best care varies tremendously, and is very patchy. It is for that reason that end-of-life care has been the subject of recent studies and reports, not least those of the Health Committee.

I understand that a very thorough piece of work was done before I became a member of the Committee last year, and that concerns were raised about this very issue. The “Choice” review body looked into it as well, and came up with various recommendations. I want to focus on one of those recommendations in particular. The review recommended that 24/7 care should be made available for people in a community setting. The point has already been made that it is hard to define the end of life and the timescale involved. Indeed, the British Medical Association makes the point that more funds are needed to train staff to a level at which they can better identify these things. The end of life can be a lengthy process, and people need support at this most important time of their life.

Most people who responded to questionnaires on this subject have said that they would prefer to die in the comfort of their own home, surrounded by their family. In order for that to happen with the maximum dignity and the highest standards, investment is needed in social care above all else. The recent cuts in social care budgets have been a matter of concern for most of us. Lancashire County Council is further reducing its spending on social care, and the elderly and disabled in my constituency and their families are already worried about the impact that this could have on them. However, we still aspire to have the highest possible standards for end of life care, and the two concepts simply do not add up.

I wonder why the Government are delaying their response to the “Choice” review. We desperately need to hear what their plans are, to determine whether they are really listening. The “Choice” review also recommended additional funding of £130 million, because the amount that was allocated for spending in the NHS has already been well and truly spent many times over. County councils’ adult social care budgets are feeling the pinch.
[Julie Cooper]

Last year, in the run-up to the introduction of the private Member’s Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris)—the Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill—people in my constituency told me of their concerns about dignity at the end of life. Many of them asked me to vote to support the Bill because they were worried that a level of care that afforded them the dignity they wanted would not be available. They were worried about whether they might suffer and what the experience would be like for their families.

This issue is rightly at the top of the agenda, because this is the very least that we can do for the elderly and the sick. We do not like to talk about it, but everyone’s life is going to end and we need to think about this. The fact that we cannot do this better in 21st-century Britain makes me ashamed. We know that we could do it better, so I urge the Minister to read the recommendations put forward last year by the Health Committee and by the “Choice” review. In fact, I am sure that he has already done so. Almost 12 months have gone by, and this is a matter of urgency. It is quite shocking that we have not dealt with it before. I urge the Minister to look at the recommendations and to ensure that those who choose to die in their own homes in the community get the excellent care and support that they rightly deserve.

4.13 pm

Mr Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): This is a timely debate. We do not discuss this matter regularly, and I pay tribute to the Health Committee for producing its report. Having looked at the Official Report, I understand that the last debate on the subject took place in 2011. That debate concentrated on Great Yarmouth and Waveney. The subject deserves a lot more discussion because it affects many of our constituents and their families. If things go wrong at the end of life, it can leave the surviving partner and the family with a great sense of guilt. All of us have had people come into our surgeries who cannot get over the way in which a relative has been treated in these circumstances. It is absolutely vital for the wellbeing of the families that the Government get this policy right, so that they can move on and recover from the experience. Over the years, I have observed fantastic fundraisers for hospices in the community, and this is one area where the charity sector comes into its own, with rugby matches, cricket matches and jamborees. These things do get public support but it is sometimes a hard ask to keep raising the sort of money that they do. I therefore welcome the fact that the Government have increased the funding, although I think it is right and proper that they do not overdo it, because sometimes Government money can drive out money raised by the private sector.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a good point. What I have also noticed about the hospice movement is that many people go in for one or two days a week when they start to become ill. That not only makes them familiar with the hospice, but gives respite to the rest of the family, allowing the carer to do all the jobs they would otherwise have done if they were not caring for their relative. It means that they get more used to the environment, so when the final days come things are much easier for the family. Dealing with this situation and how the families feel is important. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) mentioned the Liverpool pathway. All of us have constituents who have been worried about how their relatives were being treated at the end of their life, so I am glad that we have decided to phase that pathway out.

My principal point is to pay tribute to the wonderful fundraisers, the wonderful nurses and the charity organisations that do so much in our constituencies to make families feel at ease at this difficult time. I welcome the “Choice” review, which the Government have set up. It has come up with some sensible recommendations and I hope the Government respond to them soon, so that people can spend their final days with dignity, respect and a degree of privacy.

Over the years, I have been impressed by how people deal with the difficulties at the end of life. It is up to us, as politicians, to give people the maximum possible choice, so that they have the maximum possible control over those final few days and can discuss with their family what is going to happen. My hon. Friend made a good point about putting legal provision in place where people have dementia or Alzheimer’s—provision to do with wills and businesses—and all these things are important. Of course most people want to stay at home, and I perfectly understand that, but people often end up in hospital because the ambulance service picks them up in the last few days of their life.

A relatively small number of people die in hospices. As I say, the main benefit of the hospice movement is the day care and outreach it provides to the community, and the reassurance, support and experience it gives to the NHS. The charity sector and this sector are perfect examples of where private and charity bodies can work with the NHS, and may well sometimes be a model for other areas. This is Britain at its best. Tremendous people in all our constituencies are doing terribly well. However, I leave the Minister with the point that we have to respect individuals and families at this difficult time, and if we pick up some of the suggestions of the “Choice” review, we will be taking a real step forward on how people face a challenging occasion.

4.18 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to speak in this debate, during the second day of our consideration of the 2015-16 estimates. This is the fourth of our estimates debates and it is on end-of-life care. Supporting an individual at the end of their life is a difficult experience for all involved, be they family members, friends or healthcare workers. Health and social care services play a vital role in making palliative care as dignified as possible, and in ensuring that the patient’s wishes and needs are taken into account.
The Liaison Committee has recommended that this important subject be debated today as part of the estimates process.

The Scottish Parliament is partly funded by a block grant. The change in this block grant is determined every year by the Barnett formula. In simple terms, the Barnett formula looks at the change in each Department’s funding in England for that year, and applies either an increase or a decrease in the level of funding that Scotland receives. The calculation takes into account the level of devolution of each Department, and allocates Scotland a population share on that basis.

The Department of Health, as it relates to end-of-life care, has a 100% comparability percentage when it comes to the calculation of Barnett consequentials, which means that any change in the departmental expenditure limit will have a full population share effect on the block grant for this area. Naturally, I was looking forward—indeed, I was on the edge of my seat—to scrutinising the changes that the Government were making to the budgets for end-of-life care. I picked up HC 747, “Central Government Supply Estimates 2015-16”, and flicked speedily to the Department of Health section on pages 97 to 112. Members can imagine my shock and disappointment when I found that the words “end-of-life care” were not mentioned anywhere in the booklet. It is a bit surprising considering that it is 736 pages long—one would have thought that end-of-life care would have appeared somewhere.

Then the Order Paper came out. Hurrah, thought I, this is my opportunity, because it mentioned a number of documents associated with end-of-life care. I thought that I could look at the budget in relation to end-of-life care and see what the knock-on effect would be for Scotland. I picked up all the various documents, but found that none of them lays out the budgetary spend, or the saving, associated with the changes. The documents do tackle major issues of great importance in relation to end-of-life care in NHS England. They highlight both the strengths and the weaknesses in current end-of-life care provision and lay out the UK Government’s plans to make changes, but they do not lay out the budgetary spend or saving associated with any of those changes.

End-of-life care is important to those many families and individuals who are struggling to come to terms with bad news, navigate the health and social care systems, ensure appropriate support is in place for themselves and their loved ones, and make plans and take decisions that they never dreamed they would have to make. It is important that Parliament ensures that end-of-life care is funded appropriately. I know that many Members want to talk about the issues that have to be faced and the ways to solve them—or at least how to alleviate the suffering a little for these families and individuals—but it is nigh on impossible for Parliament to provide appropriate scrutiny of the funding when we are not provided with the budgetary costs associated with the plans.

I want an increased spend in the Department of Health budget as it relates to end of life care, but I am struggling with these documents, as I cannot discover how much is currently being spent on it. Also, I am not allowed to table an amendment that proposes to increase Government spend in this area. If I desired to amend the total net budget of the Department of Health, which is £25,869,317,000, my only option would be to amend the budget downwards by £1,000. There are no other amendments that I can table in relation to this, so I cannot, during the estimates process, move an amendment to increase the Department of Health budget in relation to end-of-life care or to anything else and, consequentially, the Scottish block grant.

I am very pleased that we are discussing this vital and difficult issue, but I am distressed that we are not able to discuss in any detail the funding of this area, which is becoming increasingly important as our population ages.

4.23 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to participate in this debate today. A number of common themes run through the debate, the first of which is the fact that most people want to die in their own beds. Before coming to this debate, I tried to find some statistics on the subject. I trawled through a whole lot of figures on the internet, and what I came up with was the fact that 70% of us want to die in our own beds, yet 60% of people die in hospital.

Why is there such a discrepancy in the figures? Is it a ridiculous aspiration for 70% of us to want to die in our beds, or do we need to be better at organising end-of-life care services? The evidence from the Netherlands suggests the latter. In particular, there needs to be more emphasis on the social care aspect, the reorganisation of that and its delivery.

What does that come down to in practice? The issue came to the fore in my constituency with the re-provision of a hospital in Henley, the Townlands hospital. The hospital will be re-provided with a greater range of services for people to access and a limited number of beds at the side of the hospital in a care home. The gap is being taken up by a system that has come to be called ambulatory care, involving greater use of social care packages. This follows a change in practice, where the aim is to reduce the number of beds and keep people out of hospital for as long as possible.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): My own father died at home. The Government’s response to the report states that a priority is to ensure that families are kept in the loop in the final days, but in our case, we did not know it was my father’s final days. A nurse turned up on the last day with an end-of-life care kit. In front of my father she said, “Here’s the end-of-life care kit,” and he died a few hours later. Does my hon. Friend agree that better communication is needed with those who want to die at home?

John Howell: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. As many hon. Members know, I recently lost my mother. Contrary to what I said earlier, she died in hospital, but I have to say that the services provided were exemplary. We were taken into the thinking of the clinicians as her illness progressed, we were told exactly what would happen, and this led to a greater feeling of comfort with the whole process when she eventually died. I am reconciled with the idea that it was what she wanted. That fits in with the idea of personal choice, where that is possible. In my mother’s case it was not possible because of the illness, but I do not know the circumstances of my hon. Friend’s case. It is something that needs to be borne in mind.
There are still those locally who cannot see that the best interests are served by reducing unnecessary admissions to hospital and moving people out of hospital as soon as possible. I have listened to the clinical advice and the clinical evidence that this is the best way to go. Hospitals, contrary to what they may seem, are not necessarily healthy institutions. Even a short stay reduces the ability of muscles to function and affects quality of life. I spoke to the Alzheimer’s Society about this. The evidence was clear: although admission to hospital or, better still, to care homes will inevitably be required, the best advice was to keep people out of hospital for as long as possible. That was true even in the case of people suffering from Alzheimer’s.

This approach is not just about providing services to those who need periodic treatment, especially end-of-life care. It demands a revolution in the way social care is provided. I am a great advocate of integrated social care and healthcare, and I have heard from doctors about the way in which they decide on the services to be provided. When somebody presents to them with an illness, whatever it might be, the choices are a medical solution—they can be shipped off to hospital or given a prescription—or a social care solution. The feedback I have received from doctors is that they do not have control over the social care aspect, they cannot provide the services and it is very difficult for individuals to access those services, particularly at weekends.

We need this revolution for better control of social care by clinical commissioning groups. We need this revolution for the better use of providing medicine in the home, for example by using internet services, as has been mentioned, which I think is a magnificent way to go. We need this revolution for the timeliness of the provision of services. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr Symes) that we need to work across organisations to get this right, including those in the charity sector. If we do that, we can get a really integrated approach.

4.30 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). When the House debated assisted dying last year, the point was made very strongly that good quality palliative care should be available to all; that at the end of life people deserve a good death, with access to palliative care and support; and that, rather than being subject to a postcode lottery, consistent, high quality end-of-life care should be available to all. Yet the quality of care and support that people and their families experience still varies significantly depending on where they live. Sadly, many people who would benefit from palliative care do not receive any at all. It is estimated that over 100,000 people a year in the UK—almost one in five of all deaths—would benefit from palliative care but do not receive it.

I want to talk about hospice care, as many Members have done. Hospice care forms a vital part of palliative care, supporting people through illness, the end of life, bereavement and into remembrance. It provides for the medical, emotional, social, practical, psychological and spiritual needs of individuals, as well as the needs of their family and carers. Although many might think of hospice care as in-patient care, in fact 90% of it is provided through day care and at-home services, enabling patients to stay in their own homes—many Members have mentioned how important that is—and giving much-needed respite for carers.

Hospice care relies heavily on the support of local communities; it is estimated that 125,000 volunteers donate their time and expertise to UK hospices. On average, Government funding covers only a third of the expenditure of hospices. My constituency is served by an excellent local hospice, Springhill, which works closely with the community and is well known and well respected. The cost of running the hospice exceeds £3 million a year, and 70% of the running costs come from fundraising in the local community. Year on year, Springhill hospice has to attract 70% of its income through fundraising events, charity shops, lottery, legacies and donations. Like many local people, I am doing my bit to help this year by running the Manchester 10k in aid of the hospice.

Springhill, like most hospices, provides a wide range of services in addition to in-patient and out-patient services, all of which improve the end-of-life experience for both patients and their carers and families. As part of its education programme, the hospice has developed a palliative care education passport for staff in care and nursing homes, and it has just celebrated the first group of 34 staff who have completed the passport. To complete the passport, health and care staff must demonstrate kindness, as well as the skills, confidence and the application of knowledge in the care of those with palliative care needs; transferable skills that, once part of everyday practice, will enhance the care of all service users. That is just one example of a hospice working in partnership with other healthcare providers to deliver better care to more people and to help reduce pressure on the NHS. Such partnerships are vital to deliver the improved end-of-life care we all want to see.

Although we would all agree that our hospices are doing great work, I would like to take this opportunity to talk about statutory funding and commissioning arrangements for our local hospices. NHS and local authority funding for hospice care varies considerably between localities, and a variety of commissioning and contracting practices exists. More than two thirds of hospices had their funding from local CCGs frozen or cut in 2014–15, and more than eight in 10 hospices do not think they are funded fairly and sustainably by the NHS and local authorities. If the Government invested more in hospice care, they could reduce the number of people in hospital at the end of their life who had no clinical need, and no wish, to be there. That would help to relieve the pressure on the NHS and the strain on A&E and acute wards, and it would improve the end-of-life experience for the patient and their family.

I cannot talk about end-of-life care without paying tribute to the work of Marie Curie and Macmillan nurses, without whom patients are more likely to use A&E services and to spend longer in hospital. Although a small number of people would prefer to die in hospital, that is the least preferred option for the majority. As the Chair of the Select Committee mentioned, the Nuffield Trust has shown that using the Marie Curie nursing service results in a £500 reduction in total care costs per person. That cost saving can be replicated by other
palliative care providers, meaning that investing in community-based palliative care can save the NHS money and reduce pressure on hospitals.

Changing demographics mean that the situation around end of life care will get worse. By 2040, an extra 100,000 people will die each year. The number of people with long-term conditions will have grown from 1.9 million in 2008 to 2.9 million in 2018. Unless the Government take action now to improve access to palliative care, the situation can only get worse, not better.

4.37 pm

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome this debate, not least because end-of-life care, or death, is something we as a society tend to avoid talking about, and there are parallels with mental health. Another parallel is that, like mental health, this issue is too often overlooked in our healthcare system. Talking about it here is therefore a step in the right direction.

It is of course good to see that the UK ranks No. 1 in international studies, as other hon. Members have said, but we know that we as a society do not do end-of-life care well enough—in fact, too often we do it badly. One reason that many constituents wrote to me before the assisted dying debate to support assisted dying was that they lacked confidence in the system’s provision of end-of-life care and were not confident that they would have the chance of a good death. As many of us know, it is possible to have a good death, and that is what is experienced in many hospices, which do excellent work, as well as, sometimes, in hospitals and care homes.

Too few people die where they want to, quite apart from the quality of the experience they have. For example, only 6% of over-75s in Kent want to die in hospital, yet 40% actually die there. Some 86% want to die at home or in a hospice, but only 29% die in either of those places.

Every year about 500,000 people die in the UK. As the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said, about one in five of them do not even receive palliative care. Those 500,000 people have family and friends who are affected by their death, so quality of death, on the basis of scale alone, should be a priority. In their final weeks and months, most people are highly dependent on the NHS, and there are frequent emergency hospital admissions for people towards the end of their life. Those hospital admissions account for 70% of health costs in their last three months of life. Unnecessary admissions to hospital are not only a bad experience for many individuals towards the end of their life, but expensive, and the NHS has scarce resources. That is another reason why it should be a priority to prevent people from dying in hospital when they do not want or need to. The question is whether it is yet a priority. The Public Administration Committee heard evidence that end-of-life care was still consistently overlooked across the NHS.

For the situation to improve, four things need to happen. There needs to be a focus on it from the very top of the NHS—from the leadership and from Government. There needs to be investment in capabilities to give people a better quality of death—not only capabilities of staff in terms of their skills, but in the technology that is needed. There needs to be better learning from what works; many places around the country, and internationally, do this well. There needs to be much greater transparency and measurement of where it is going well and where it is being done badly, and accountability on quality.

On the technology point, many people lack a plan for how they want to die, yet that that can make a real difference. In the absence of a plan, there is often a default response when something happens to somebody who is frail and possibly close to death: an ambulance is called, they are taken to A and E, and they end up in the acute ward of a hospital and may never leave. Only last week, I spoke to a local GP who was very frustrated about this happening to his patients. He has often discussed with them what they would like to happen if their end of life is approaching, and sometimes even written it down. However, too often, in the moment of crisis, what he has written down makes no difference at all, because the people on the scene at the time—for instance, if an ambulance is called out of hours—do not have access to the plan that he has discussed with the patient.

That said, the GP was optimistic that this could change, because his CCG, NHS West Kent, is implementing an electronic care broadcasting system whereby other doctors, A and E and the ambulance staff would be able to access what the patient had said they wanted to happen in that situation. There is strong evidence of the benefits of such systems, which means that far more people are able to die in their preferred place. In some cases, this has resulted in the number of people getting to die in their preferred place of death rising to about 80%, and brought hospital deaths down from the average of about 53% across the country to below 40%, or even as low as 4%. Implementing such systems should therefore be a priority, as should learning from where they are going well.

Transparency and monitoring are a crucial part of improving end-of-life care. We need more transparency. We need to know about the variability that has been mentioned. As MPs, we need to know how good the end-of-life care is for our constituents. I welcome the CQC’s increased attention to end-of-life care, but there are yawning gaps in reporting on quality. There is great inconsistency between what is reported in different areas and different institutions, and between CCGs, and relatively little is reported consistently at a national level. There needs to be a much greater focus on reporting. That was one of the recommendations in the Select Committee’s report, and NHS IQ—Improving Quality—looked at it before being transferred into NHS England. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister updated us on what is going on with regard to transparency on quality of end-of-life care, as I know that this Government do understand the importance of transparency.

All of us here today know that end-of-life care must improve; that this affects hundreds of thousands of people every year; that improving it will require continued and greater leadership and focus from the very top of the NHS and from Government; that investment will be required in capabilities and in technology, and should also lead to some cost savings; that there should be greater transparency, monitoring and accountability in respect of quality; and that there should be more, and more effective, sharing of the success stories and evidence of what works. Those things would mean that end-of-life care really was a priority for the health and care system, and that it should improve.
many patients or residents, or rushing around too many treated with respect. Pay is one thing, but compassion is when they feel they are being pressured and not being under pressure. People’s compassion starts to be diminished hospital or a care home simply because the staff are in their homes or have not had the right care in a certainly have—where people have not been treated well homes with elderly single people who are in their last days. We have to make sure that compassion is to the fore in all these matters.

I have also said on many occasions that we do not spend enough on health and social care in general. We are rightly proud of the national health service and the principles on which it is based, but it is underfunded. We spend at least 2% less of our GDP—about £35 billion a year less—on health than France or Germany. With an injection of £35 billion a year, some of the stresses that cause the problems in hospitals in particular would go away. I also think, and said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) before the last election, that long-term care of all kinds ought to be provided on precisely the same basis as the national health service, completely free at the point of need. I believe that it should be provided by public servants rather than by the private sector. Only when we accept that we have to pay properly for the health and care service and resource it appropriately—that we have to pay people properly and make sure that we have enough staff—will we ensure that elderly people are cared for when they are alive, and that they die a dignified, pain-free and suffering-free death.

I will leave it there, although I would like to say a lot more. I hope that other Members will support some of the things that I have said.

Subsequent to the Government’s refusal to pay for long-term care, there have been a series of forced privatisations of local authority care homes, which I opposed. In my own constituency, three first-class local authority care homes, where people would spend the last days of their lives, were forced to close and the residents were handed over to the private sector, which is driven by profit rather than concern for care alone. Some of the private homes are very good, but some are not. There have been some serious, well-publicised lapses of care, and there has been an ongoing crisis in the care homes world. I am concerned about that.

We congratulate ourselves on how we care for our elderly, particularly in the last days of their lives, but the situation is not all good. Some hon. Members have referred to the problems, including people not getting the palliative care they deserve and need. That is deeply worrying. We are all going to die one day and some of us are closer to that time than others, and we want to make sure that we and our families are cared for properly in those last difficult days. The subject needs more debate, more Government action and more support.

The reports are concerned about compassion. Undoubtedly, medical and care staff are overwhelmingly compassionate people, but it is not good that they are being put under pressure and made to work long hours; that they have too many residents to care for in the homes; and that they are being rushed because of concerns about costs and the desire to maximise profits. That means that people suffer. We have all had cases—I certainly have—where people have not been treated well in their homes or have not had the right care in a hospital or a care home simply because the staff are under pressure. People’s compassion starts to be diminished when they feel they are being pressured and not being treated with respect. Pay is one thing, but compassion is damaged when a staff member is looking after too many patients or residents, or rushing around too many homes.
informed choices so that we can make a better estimate of how to allocate resources and better integrate the different elements in our society.

One challenge that has frustrated me concerns free social care at the end of life. The Select Committee recommends in its excellent report that “the Government clarify the eligibility criteria for the NHS Continuing Healthcare Fast Track Pathway”.

Some of my constituents have waited far too long to have such matters resolved; for example, I raised the situation of the Vaughans last week in business questions. Ambiguity and long delays in sorting things out cause enormous distress to families who are trying to make sensible provision.

I recognise the great emphasis that is placed on dying at home, and the tragedy that almost half—47%—of the 470,000 people who died in 2014 died in hospital, although the latest survey shows that only 3% of people who stated a preference wanted to die in hospital. By any measure, that is a failure of society. Governments and us all in not delivering what people want. That is not efficient for public services—it is more expensive—but it is also really unpleasant for the families involved when they cannot deliver what their loved ones want.

I hope that the Government will be able to give real and costed responses to the report and to all the various groups that have commented on the need for greater clarity about the Government’s intentions. Our constituents need that, and we need to do more to ensure that this does not become a taboo subject, but one on which there is greater engagement, so that we can secure better outcomes for those who are dying and for their families.

4.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the chance to speak on this issue. According to the End of Life Care Coalition, in the 12 months since the “Choice” review was published, almost 50,000 people experienced poor care during the last three months of their lives.

Some right hon. and hon. Members have clearly said that they are speaking from a family point of view, and I heard some of their speeches in the Chamber. Twelve months ago today my father passed away. My dad always wanted to die at home, but that was not possible. He had fallen out of bed and broken his femur. It was quite impossible for my mum to give him the care that he had to have, so he passed away in hospital. I have some experience of end-of-life care in hospitals, and I must say that I commend those involved: first, my mother, who was very loyally and religiously attentive to him, but also the nurses, who particularly helped and were very attentive and caring.

The 2015 report from the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, “Dying without dignity”, demonstrated the consequences of people dying without access to high-quality care and support. It highlighted cases where people had died in distressing circumstances, which had a lasting impact on their friends and families.

That is what we are focusing on today. Unfortunately, research by the London School of Economics suggests that such situations are not as rare as they should be. The people who tend to miss out on palliative care are those with conditions other than cancer, those over the age of 85, single people and people from black and minority ethnic communities. Quite clearly, these are issues.

Research conducted by Ipsos MORI and Marie Curie—many of us met those from Marie Curie in Parliament yesterday—have found that seven out of 10 carers thought that people with a terminal illness were not getting all the care and support that they need. I commend the Marie Curie nurses for the hard and very attentive work that they do. Again, I have experienced that personally because a good friend of mine, Irene Brown, passed away just last week. Marie Curie helped her and her family greatly near the end of her life.

We have had ongoing worries and troubles about care homes in my constituency, with the threat of closures compounding the misery for people who need help the most and who already have to deal with an over-pressed and strained health service. I have to say, with respect, that the fact that such issues are not at the top of the priority list only serves to strengthen the disillusionment with the Government.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern, which was highlighted by some of the Marie Curie nurses I met, that while they very much want to do an excellent job in looking after they people they serve, they cannot do so all week but only on a couple of days, with less experienced staff coming in to fill in the gaps?

Jim Shannon: I obviously agree with the hon. Lady. I understand exactly what she says, as I think does everyone in the House. The Marie Curie nurses are special nurses and they do a grand job.

The issue of state-assisted suicide has been mentioned. We have had a debate in the House and a clear decision has been made, by an outstanding majority, that there is no need for it, and we will keep that going. We do not need to discuss the matter, because it has already been decided.

I want to refer quickly to the significant improvements to end-of-life care in Northern Ireland with the ambitious “Transforming your care” plan. Although there is still a long way to go, I ask the Minister sitting on the Front Bench, who is always very responsive, to look at what all the devolved regions have been doing, not least Northern Ireland, to ensure that the best strategy known and available nationwide is being implemented so that the figures I led with are reduced as much as possible and as fast as possible. We all know people or have known people going through this period of their life and, young or old, it is a reality that all of us will face some day. The UK Government and the devolved Governments need to do better on this issue to give ordinary, everyday, hard-working people the treatment they deserve at such a distressing time.

I will conclude on this point because I am conscious that other Members wish to speak. If the Government have been taking action on this issue, they need to make that clear and publicise it, despite the obvious delay. In other words, are the Government giving end-of-life care the focus and money it needs, and are they working with charities and hospices to ensure that it is delivered? It is true that there should be no timescale for coming up with the best solution, but it is equally true that there has been insufficient explanation as to why the timescale...
has been delayed. I know that the Minister will respond
to that. That delay is compounding the misery for
people who are affected by this issue and their families.
When it comes to end-of-life care, let us ensure that we
deliver for our constituents.

5 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I will draw on
cases that I have had with people around the
country who have experienced a relative dying fairly
recently, as well as on my own observations. I will not
mention a particular case, because if I did have a
difficult case, I would take it up privately in the usual
way.

The first conclusion that I have formed, which I think
the Secretary of State has wisely come to, is that a
patient undergoing the last stages of their life and their
family need a named doctor who is in charge. The
family and the patient, when the patient has capacity,
need to have access at reasonable times to that doctor to
find out where they have got to and what the next stage
is likely to be.

I believe that Ministers have put in place a requirement
for there to be a named general practitioner for every
patient when they are at home or in a care home. That
is very welcome and let us hope that it works, so that there
is someone people can turn to, whom they trust and
know. However, when, as so often happens, people
enter hospital and may not come out again, because of
the way in which rosters and rotas work, it means that
every day or every other day there is a different group of
doctors and nurses in charge of them.

That can mean one of two things. Sometimes, the
family and/or the patient are constantly retold very bad
news because the new team feels that they have a duty to
tell them. It may not be helpful for people to keep
getting the same bad news. Alternatively, the family or
the patient with capacity may want information at a
particular time, but no one is up to speed because they
have only recently taken over and have not had time to
read the notes. Indeed, reading the notes is not necessarily
as good as being continuously in charge of the patient
and talking to them over the days or weeks in which the
treatment is undertaken or as their last days draw near.
I therefore urge Ministers to get behind the idea that it
is best if there is a named senior doctor—perhaps a
consultant or registrar.

Often, people in their last few weeks or months of life
have complex and multiple medical conditions, so a
series of different consultants are involved, but no one
consultant feels as if they are ultimately in charge. I am
told that in some hospitals patients are moved from
ward to ward at very short notice, with different specialties
in mind. The family then turn up and do not even know
where the patient is, because they think that they will be
where they last saw them. That can be very disruptive
for the family. More care and attention is needed in
some cases to deal with that issue.

The second issue, which has been mentioned by other
colleagues, is the interface between social care and
hospitals. All of us who visit hospitals as Members of
Parliament and sometimes as family members will have
observed that a very large number of patients in a lot of
our wards are extremely elderly and very frail, with lots
of complex medical conditions. Some of them may not
be easy to treat. Others might be better off in a care
home or at home, but there has been a failure to put
together the set of services that they need.

I do not really believe that that is a money issue,
because in many cases one could buy an awful lot of
social care for the cost of the hospital bed that the
person is occupying. Social care might even be cheaper.
I am not recommending that we take people out of
hospital because somewhere else is cheaper, but if they
would be better off somewhere else, if they want to be
somewhere else and if there are no longer any medical
interventions that the hospital can make, it is sensible to
take advantage of social care if it is also cheaper.

Kelvin Hopkins: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman
says, but when local authorities know that they have to
pay for care when somebody comes out of hospital,
they will try to persuade them to stay in hospital for as
long as possible. Different budgets put different pressures
on different institutions.

John Redwood: The hon. Gentleman is right. Throughout
the time he and I have been in the House, under
Governments of different persuasions, we have all known
about the problem, we have all said that we need to
solve it and still we have not managed to do that. I hope
that our current talented Ministers can do something
that no previous groups of Ministers have been able to
achieve. There is an experiment because, with the devolution
models that Ministers are considering, if the health and
social care budgets are put together under the same
authority, the excuse that there is a budget row goes.
One would hope that the best interests of the patient
were dominant and that authorities would realise that,
in some cases, the best interests of the patient also
enabled them to save money through switching from an
expensive hospital bed to a decent care package. That
could be helpful, and I hope that Ministers will do that.

For the families of those who die, the need for care
does not end at the moment of death. That is generally
understood by the public sector, but there are serious
problems with delivering the support and administrative
back-up that families need when a loved one dies.
Several people who have been through this recently told
me that the first thing that happens is a delay in getting
a death certificate. Without a death certificate, nothing
can be done to settle things. People cannot even hold a
funeral because they cannot instruct a funeral director
until they have a death certificate.

Not only is there a delay in getting the death certificate
from the medical staff at the hospital, but people cannot
register the death because of the insistence on a face-to-face
meeting with the registrar, which can mean a further
delay of many days before a slot becomes available.
Quite a lot of families therefore end up with one, two,
three and four weeks of delay before they get the death
certificate, which is necessary to trigger the funeral and
any financial changes consequent on a person’s death.

The Government have introduced a sensible “Tell Us
Once” system so that when a person dies, the family can
fill in quite a complicated electronic form, which is
meant to tell all Departments with which the dead
person may have been involved what the Government
need to know. There are two problems with that. First,
families often do not have all the knowledge that they
need. Unless they have that knowledge, the Government seem unable to cross-refer and discover that, for example, the person had a benefit as well as a pension. It would be helpful if Government computers talked to each other more adequately so that the Government could do more of the work and families just had to notify them of the death and did not have to know every detail of the dead person’s financial affairs.

Secondly, because the delays with the death certificate and registrar appointments often mean that registration of the death is delayed, the Government make payments to the deceased person, and the families, having used “Tell Us Once”, get a set of not terribly friendly letters—I appreciate that they have been dressed up a bit—saying, “Your dead relative owes us this much money”. The families cannot necessarily get their hands on that money, but they are none the less obliged to pay the Government back, at an unsettling time when they are mourning and grieving and were not expecting a tax or benefit bill.

In the interests of handling the families better, the Government should speed up their side of the administration so that the death can be registered promptly, the Government do not make wrong payments and the families are not faced with letters demanding money back when they have other things on their mind and are trying to deal with the hurt. It does not make it better when the Government say, “We’re very sorry you’ve had a loss” if they go on to say, “but you owe us this much money”. The usual rules apply. See you in prison if you don’t pay”.

We need to improve greatly on dealing with the first few weeks for the poor grieving families, who do not necessarily know the process, are very lost because they have lost their loved one, and are not helped by delays and sometimes the incompetence of the regulatory authorities.

5.9 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) for her excellent work in leading the Health Committee. I will not repeat points that a number of Members have raised, but there is a consensus that the issue of end-of-life care is growing in prominence and importance. The debate on assisted dying last September drove that discussion, and since then a number of Adjournment debates have focused on why end-of-life care is so important.

We know that 480,000 deaths a year occur in England and according to Macmillan Cancer Support, only 53% of people die in a place of their choice. We know that there are gaps in provision—not just in access and quality, but also according to disease type. As a cancer nurse, I was fortunate to have access to excellent palliative care, not just locally but for patients nationally. However, for those suffering from many other diseases, such as multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s, there is little or no access to good end-of-life care. As a result, there have been a number of reviews. We heard about the “Choice” review, which identified gaps and gave some solutions for meeting them, and last year the Health Committee delivered its report on how end-of-life care could be improved. The report by the Parliamentary Health Service Ombudsman, “Dying without dignity”, identified the same gaps. We know what the problems are, and now we need to deliver the solutions.

As this is an estimates debate, I will flag up the figures in those reports. We must invest £400 million annually in NHS community services to move end-of-life care out of hospitals—where most people do not want to die—and into the community, and we need roughly £100 million each year for local social services to provide the social care to back that up. That would deliver a saving of £370 million for the NHS and the acute services that are now picking those people up, but from my experience I think the savings will actually be much higher.

In the short time I have been an MP, many constituents have written to me, including an elderly gentleman of 92, who, a couple of weeks before the last Christmas that he would spend with his family, was stuck in hospital—not because of symptom or pain control, but for the lack of a feeding pump. He had a feeding pump in hospital, but because he wanted to go home to die and the community did not have one, he had to stay in hospital. That cost thousands of pounds a day, but more importantly it took precious time away from him and his family, just for the lack of a feeding pump. Such things cost a few pounds—I would have given the money myself if that is what it would have taken.

We know that £500 million would deliver district nurses to provide care, pharmacists, social services, and not just the seven-day-a-week NHS that we are proud we want to achieve, but the 24-hour care that most of those patients need. That would improve care and choice for those patients, and once that initial investment had been made, just £130 million a year would help to sustain it for health and social care. It would be money well spent if we could find it.

I bring good news for the Minister: we do not just need money. I make a plea for him to consider the Access to Palliative Care Bill that is currently finishing its passage through the other place, sponsored by Baroness Finlay. It shows that such an approach has a proven track record of delivering end-of-life care without needing a huge amount of investment, because it forces local CCGs to commission palliative care. That is what we are missing at the moment. Placing such care in the hands of CCGs makes them locally accountable, because what will deliver good palliative care in a London borough is very different from what will work in a rural constituency such as mine. It is important that CCGs take on that responsibility. I know from working in acute cancer care that unless something is commissioned and paid for, it does not happen.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does she recognise that there is a particular challenge when commissioners can seem almost to get something for nothing, with local hospices taking on more and more responsibility? It is important that local commissioners—wherever they are in the country—recognise that the services they rely on from hospices need to be paid for. As those services have increased in recent years, commissioners need to think about allocating more of their budget to them, which could then make savings for the other services that they commission.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely. Those commissioning services realise their value. Hospices have taken up a lot of care. We all value our hospices, but that work is not necessarily valued financially. From working in cancer
care, I know that my trust was commissioned to deliver day services, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. It was paid on a case-by-case basis. As soon as someone had finished their treatment and needed end-of-life care, however, everyone washed their hands of the responsibility because no one was getting paid for it. That is the reality of the situation. We need commissioning for end-of-life care to happen.

The Access to Palliative Care Bill, which has just gone through the other place, establishes four clear guidelines that would greatly improve end-of-life care without the money needed to back it up. First, on pain and symptom control, we should have an evidence base of what works for each disease and make sure that that is what happens. Secondly, there should be education and training for all staff and not just for those in end-of-life care. There is a huge amount of palliative and symptom control that staff, whatever their speciality—intensive care units, cardiac units, renal units and so on—can provide without needing specialist knowledge. All staff need to know is the point at which they need specialist advice. Simple education and training would enable that to happen and improve greatly the care that patients receive.

Research is the third guideline set out by Baroness Finlay in the Bill. Never underestimate the difference that research can make to end-of-life care. When I was a new nurse in the early ’90s, patients with hypercalcemia were admitted all the time. Hypercalcemia is when there is too much calcium in the bloodstream. Patients are confused and dehydrated, and they spend their last few days and weeks unable to communicate with their relatives. However, with research and the advent of bisphosphonates, it is very, very rare to see a case of hypercalcemia. Research into end-of-life care made that difference. Finally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) pointed out, having the CQC inspect end-of-life care would make a huge difference, not just in the acute setting but across the board.

Other Members want to speak on this important subject, so I will just say that if the £500 million needed to implement the “Choice” review is not available, that should not stop us from improving end-of-life care. Many of the aspects of the Access to Palliative Care Bill would make a huge difference to patients and their families. I urge the Minister to consider them in his closing remarks.

5.17 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak in this very important debate. It is pleasing that, as we have heard from so many other hon. Members, end-of-life care in the UK is ranked No. 1. That is not good enough, however, because there are so many variations across the whole of the UK. I am sure the reason why we are ranked No. 1 is mainly due to the wonderful hospice movement that we have heard so much about. It contributes so much to so many thousands of lives every day across the whole country. It is the medical professionals, the volunteers, the fundraisers and the donors who really make the difference. As I said, the system is not perfect and we still have an awfully long way to go. There are too many times when end-of-life care is a lottery, and that should not be the case.

My constituency has actually done quite well out of that lottery. We have an amazing hospice called Treetops Hospice Care. It is quite unusual because it does not have any beds. It provides all its care either as day care or in patients’ homes. As a consequence, the number of people who are able to die in their own homes in my constituency is much higher than in other parts of the country. In the past, Treetops has benefited from two lots of capital funding: in 2010 it managed to get capital funding to extend its day care centre; and in 2013 it got capital funding to build a counselling and bereavement centre, which has been so valuable to those who have suffered the loss of their loved ones. One of my messages for the Minister, therefore, is please do not forget about capital funding. It is so important to hospices across the whole country.

The chief executive of Treetops asked me to say that money invested in hospices often saves the NHS money because hospices can deliver end of life care so much more effectively. The NHS is not for the end of life; it is for acute episodes, not best designed for the time when people need to be in quite a different environment.

As other hon. Members have mentioned, we need to realise that hospices are not only for people with cancer; they are for people with life-limiting conditions. There still seems to be a bit of fear about this: if people are told that they need palliative care and end-of-life care and they do not have cancer, they get confused. We need to make sure that our messaging is a lot clearer.

My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) talked about gaps in the service. My local CCG acknowledged gaps in the services it was commissioning. It was lucky enough to get funding from Macmillan to look at how to pull together the end-of-life care it was able to commission. It realised that the issue is not always about commissioning hospital beds or drugs; it can be about something really simple.

People coming towards the end of their lives need extra laundry, and for the people who are caring for them, having to do all the laundry is, sadly, about the last straw when it comes to the caring commitments they make. Our CCG identified that a local charity, Community Concern Erewash, has a laundry service. The CCG is able to contract out to a local charity to provide the laundry service for those going through end-of-life care. This means that many more people will be able to stay in their own homes because those caring for them can provide the emotional care without being distracted by the need to provide laundry. That provides one practical example of how it is possible to invest money wisely to make end-of-life care so much better.

All too often, our focus is on end of life care for adults, but we must never forget the importance of providing choice and support for children and young people at the end of their lives and of the subsequent bereavement counselling for their families. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work done by the organisation, Together for Short Lives, in providing such counselling. The more we discuss subjects such as end-of-life care in this place, the more open people become about talking about such a difficult subject; they feel more able to discuss it. We never used to discuss cancer, but now we do, so it will be possible for us to talk about end-of-life care in a much more open...
way. As individuals, as parents, as children and as spouses, we should be brave enough to talk about end of life.

Our healthcare professionals should also be brave enough to talk about the issues. I know from personal experience that when a Macmillan palliative care nurse had that conversation with my mum, it made the last few months of her life so much easier. It made it easier for us, too, as we no longer needed to tread carefully on the subject. Mum could openly talk about her wishes—what she wanted done with certain bits of jewellery, for example, and other things she wanted to communicate to us. When she did pass away six months after that initial conversation with the end-of-life care nurse, we knew her wishes and what to do, which made it easier for us.

Talking about end-of-life care and knowing the wishes of the patient makes it so much easier for the healthcare professionals and the relatives—and, most importantly, for the patients. We must do whatever is possible to make sure that the final wishes of those with terminal illnesses are met, so we can ensure that they can have good deaths.

5.23 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I hardly feel worthy of catching your eye today, Mr Deputy Speaker, having not been in my place for a question earlier today. I apologise to you and to Mr Speaker for that. I was, in fact, preparing for this debate, as Chairman of my Select Committee. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health Select Committee, for her report and for securing time to debate end-of-life care on the Floor of the House.

I shall wantonly use this opportunity to promote one of the reports produced by my Select Committee, the then Public Administration Select Committee. I am not just talking about the report on dying with dignity, which followed a report by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. That report underlines why my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes is absolutely on the right track in making her investigations.

We have urged the Government to recognise the shortcomings that exist in many of our health institutions. People are not recognised to be dying when they are dying, their symptoms are not addressed, and there is poor symptom control. People have watched loved ones dying in pain because of ineffective symptom management. As has been mentioned today, there has been poor communication. Professionals have failed to engage in open conversations with patients and family members. There have been inadequate out-of-hours services, and people have suffered because of difficulties in gaining access to palliative care out of hours. There has been poor care planning, and delays in diagnosis. And so it goes on.

What strikes me about so many of the accounts that we have heard this afternoon is the lack of learning, the sense of helplessness, the sense that this is just what happens in our health system. That is what drove my Committee, at the end of the last Parliament, to produce the report entitled “Investigating clinical incidents in the NHS”. Imagine what it would be like if we had an NHS in which, whenever something went wrong, there was a proper and open investigation, followed by learning from what had occurred—without blame—to prevent a repetition. So often, in debates such as this, we hear about the same things occurring again and again.

Our report revealed that “there are 12,000 avoidable hospital deaths every year. More than 10,000 serious incidents are reported” to the NHS, in England alone, “out of a total of 1.4 million mostly low-harm or no-harm incidents annually. There were 338 recorded “never events” (such as wrong site surgery) during 2013-14”, and there were 174,872 written complaints. The then latest estimate of clinical negligence liabilities on the NHS balance sheet was £26.1 billion. If we could get just 10% of that right, we would save millions of pounds. If we could avoid 10% of those incidents, we would save the NHS huge amounts of money.

We looked into the way in which other safety-critical industries dealt with safety management and incident investigation. The most notable is aviation, but similar considerations apply to marine accidents, accidents in the North sea oil industry, and the work of the Rail Accident Investigation Branch, which was set up after the Paddington rail crash. I learned a great deal when I was shadow Secretary of State for Transport at the time of that rail crash. For instance, I observed how hopeless it was that the safety regulator of the railway, the Health and Safety Executive, was responsible for investigating its own failings in the event of a rail accident.

The Committee concluded that what was needed was an independent clinical investigation service that would investigate untoward incidents in the health sector. It would have to have three key elements. First, it must provide a “safe space” in which clinicians, NHS managers, patients and patients’ families could discuss things without fear of recrimination or reprisals. Such a service does not currently exist in the health service. No one dares speak for fear of getting the blame. In aviation, it is quite normal for pilots to report each other and report themselves without fear or favour, because that safe space exists.

Secondly, the service “must be independent of providers, commissioners and regulators”. There is no such independent investigative capacity in the NHS. We have a higgledy-piggledy arrangement for investigating clinical incidents. It might be local, it might involve a regulator, but it ends up with the Secretary of State coming to the Dispatch Box and calling for a public inquiry. That is when we really know that it has all gone wrong. The Francis report was very much a jumping-off point for us.

The third requirement is that any such clinical incidents investigation service should have the power to publish reports and to disseminate its recommendations and learning. This should not be about blaming people; it should be about learning. I am very pleased that the Government accepted our recommendations and that they have set up an expert advisory group. The group has been holding discussions for many months on how to implement the proposals.

I am sad to say, however, that three things are still lacking from the Government’s proposals for what they are going to call the health safety investigation branch, which will operate in a clinical incident investigation
capacity. The Government’s refusal to contemplate primary legislation on this matter means that there will be no safe space. Their refusal to create new public sector bodies outside the framework of the NHS will mean that the health safety improvement branch will be domiciled within NHS Improvement, which is one of the regulators from which it needs to be independent. And the Government’s refusal to contemplate primary legislation means, of course, that there will be no primary legislation.

I think the Minister understands these matters very well, but I have to say to him that if, having accepted our report, the Government go ahead and create the health safety investigation branch of the NHS on this basis, they will not be implementing our findings, which they say they have accepted. It is sad that we are going to lose the opportunity to do this, and I very much hope that the Government will continue to think about introducing at least a draft Bill that would enable us to work in the longer term towards the primary legislation that we need in order to set this up. That would transform lives, and the NHS, in a way that nothing else could do.

5.31 pm

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): I very much appreciate the opportunity to talk about this important topic today. As a GP, I have been involved in delivering palliative care—as has my wife, who is a district nurse. It was mentioned earlier that during the debates on the Assisted Dying (No. 2) Bill last year, end-of-life care was highlighted as an important topic that needed to be discussed. We have a world-class palliative care service in parts of this country. Indeed, many other countries look at our hospice movement and want to adopt it for themselves. My local hospice, St Kentigern, which I visited recently, provides excellent care as well as guidance to clinicians, as do so many hospices. However, there are variations in different areas of our country, between the care provided by different clinicians and between the palliative care available for differing conditions.

I have joined the Health Committee since the general election, so I was not part of the inquiry that led to the report. I do not intend to provide an exhaustive list of issues that I feel need addressing, but I thought it might be helpful to give the House a GP’s perspective on some issues that are important to me. The lack of prior planning and discussion for patients is a very real issue. There is certainly a need for more information for patients, carers and family members. It is worth noting, however, that health policy can influence patients’ awareness of developing conditions, and I would like to mention dementia in this context.

The Government have focused on dementia in recent times, and the Prime Minister’s challenge has been quite successful in increasing diagnosis rates. The rate has now gone up to about 67%. A diagnosis gives patients the opportunity to look to the future and decide how they see the end of their life. Sadly, the diagnosis rate in my area of Wales is only 43%, which shows how health policy can influence the debate in many ways.

Care homes are clearly critical to end-of-life care. My practice certainly felt that it was able to contribute to this domain through a local enhanced service that allowed oversight by one practice and continuity of care, which is extremely important. That service also helped to prevent unnecessary admissions to hospitals. It resulted in better opportunities for staff training.

Clearly, there is pressure on hospice beds and community hospital beds. There is also a need to address privacy in the acute secondary hospital setting, where hospital is the right place for end-of-life care. We know that so many patients wish to die at home, and out-of-hours services are crucial to that. We have heard a lot about a seven-day NHS in recent times and this is one crucial area where providing services at weekends and in the evenings is so important. If a patient is waiting for a delayed period for a syringe driver, for instance, that prolongs their discomfort. We also know that there are limited community services in some instances, particularly for children.

I have seen discharge liaison services in hospitals moving heaven and earth to meet patients’ wishes and allow a death at home. Those need to be focused upon to ensure that, wherever possible, that can take place, with adequate support for carers once the patient is discharged home. Finally, clinicians need the confidence to identify what constitutes an end-of-life situation and to manage it appropriately, and so clearly there is a need for education. One in five of those who die is not receiving the end of life care that it is felt they should receive, so clearly there is still much work to be done, despite the best efforts of so many in this country.

5.36 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As has been mentioned by several Members, we all share one thing in common: we are all mortal. Although some people think they are not, we will all die. In this House, we make decisions about provision for things that might happen, but this is something that absolutely will happen to all of us and so we all have a vested interest in making sure those services are as good as possible. Three quarters of people who die do so expectedly, which means they die of an ongoing illness they already have. About a third of those are cancer patients, and the palliative care system has focused on them since its inception in the 1960s. As has been said, we should rightly be proud of the fact that the UK is listed as No. 1, but that is largely to do with inputs and resources; it is not always to do with outcomes, because we cannot always measure those. A lot of that top position we owe to the hospice movement. We owe it to people such as Dame Cicely Saunders at St Christopher’s hospice. Everyone here knows my background, but even when I was a medical student this was my interest. My fourth year dissertation, “On Death and Dying—Home, Hospice, Hospital”, was written at a time when we had hardly any hospices and this was a new-fangled specialty.

The problem is that that is not the choice people are getting, as we have heard from Members from across the House. In Scotland, we did an audit in 2010 and again in 2013 which involved every single person in hospital on one day and following them up for a year. That showed that a third of people in hospital—it was exactly the same both years—will die within a year. That backs up a well-known fact that the majority of healthcare is spent on people in the last year of their lives. Some 10% of those people actually died on that admission, and the average stay of someone who dies in hospital is about two weeks. Some of those will be
deaths we did not expect—they will be things that went wrong. However, a lot of them—three quarters—will be people with an expected illness. It is not just wasteful and it is not just futile, but for the family and the patient it is distressing.

We have heard about how people get stuck in hospital when they would like to be somewhere else. The question is: why? The No. 1 reason is that we do not talk about it; the family have not talked to the patient and the patient has not talked to the doctor—nobody has broached the subject. As someone who has been a cancer surgeon for 30 years, I know that it is difficult. I have often had to help families and patients open that conversation. There are people who say, “I won’t tell my mother”, or, “I won’t tell the children.” The family needs to be front and centre with this. One of the advantages of being at home is that people are in their own intimate space together. They have one luxury: the opportunity to say goodbye. People may have a row, go out the door, slam it and never come back. That is the worst loss. People need a chance to prepare. They need to make sure that they are at peace, that everything is organised, that they are not worrying and fretting, and that their families have the chance to say that they love each other. There is also the need to reconcile. Perhaps that person who went off in a huff 20 years ago comes back. That last bit of time is very precious.

In 2010, Scotland conducted a review of the “do not resuscitate” policy. We moved to what was described as best practice. That answers some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately)—people being scooped up by the ambulance and taken somewhere else. This was not just a tick box that the nurse or the doctor went through; it was a discussion that was shared with everyone.

The core person in all this is the GP. The GP provides the continuity. In Scotland, the summary care record is used for out-of-hours care. The GP must register a patient on the palliative care register, and that is automatically shared. If, at the weekend, someone is called in, they know what the aim is, which is that that person wants to die at home. If someone has been kept at home for months with lots of support, there is then no chance to say that they love each other. There are panics—“Mum’s got worse. What do I do? Dial 999”—and the person ends up in an ambulance and then in hospital. That is just a disaster.

As the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said, we need to tackle training. We need to train our students, our doctors, our nurses and our carers in all the settings, because people will die in all the settings. People will still die in hospital. That is unavoidable, as was said by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, but it is not an excuse for poor care or poor communication.

Ayr hospice in my constituency provides the liaison services to the hospital in which I worked, so we had palliative care consultants, liaison nurses and training for other staff. We also have a beautiful hospice that provides outreach and home care, and is trying to educate the whole community.

In Scotland, the funding of hospices is 50:50, whereas here, as we have heard, the average is a third, so it is very variable. Hospices now talk about the increased complexity of commissioning. Many of them deal with multiple clinical commissioning groups—the average is four—and they feel that they are having to jump through many hoops in exchange for whatever bit of finance they get. Hospices need to be put on a safe financial basis, and they also need to be able to plan their funding for the future.

We must not forget the care home. By 2030, a quarter of us will die in a care home, and that is the thing that many of us are most frightened of. That is because we do not have a sense of it as a place that we are tidied away to, and we fear that. We need to improve the quality of care homes and to individualise the care. We also need to introduce this end of life and palliative care philosophy to those homes.

Of course, the prize is dying at home. That is what 80% of people choose. In Scotland, we are lucky because we already have free personal care. Patients who are under 65 and have had a DS1500, which defines them as within six months of death, get free social care. We do not have the barrier that there is in England of either the difficulty of paying or the sheer time it takes to go through means-testing to get care organised. None the less, we have our challenges. The social care has to be in place. We know that all local authorities are struggling to balance their budgets. As has been mentioned by Macmillan, Marie Curie, Nuffield and the palliative care review five years ago, this would save money in the long term. However, the money cannot just be taken from the hospital and given to social care or to palliative care, because the hospital would fall over. We have to double-invest initially because, as with a Rubik’s cube, we need that little bit of space to move the first piece before anything else will happen.

This has been going around since 2011, and we are calling on the Minister to grasp the nettle and rise to the challenge. We need to follow the patient and support them through the whole journey and, as was mentioned, to support people after that journey through bereavement, to ensure that they have access to support and are not left struggling after the loss of a loved one.

It is well known that people will cope with bereavement better if their loved one has had a good journey. As was mentioned, in the assisted dying debate we threw down the challenge that if we voted against that, we had to provide high quality palliative care, to allow people to end their journey not in fear, not in pain and not feeling a burden. I call on the Minister and the Government to rise to that challenge.

5.45 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I join other Members in thanking the Chairs of the Select Committees for the work on the reports that we are debating today. I was a member of the Health Committee when it produced the end-of-life care report.

Although Ministers have talked of rising to the challenge of improving palliative care, they have yet to take the action needed. They have not responded to the independent panel’s “Choice” review report published in February 2015. I know that the Minister and his colleagues repeatedly promised to respond to that report by the end of 2015, although I note that the Minister has recently changed to saying they will respond “soon”. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) noted that 48,000 people have experienced poor end-of-life care since the “Choice” review was published. Given that figure, we need a swift Government response now, and I ask the Minister to tell us when he expects that response.
As many Members have mentioned, the palliative care workforce works extremely hard to provide good care for people nearing the end of their life. We owe a debt of gratitude to our hospices, palliative care staff in hospitals, and Macmillan and Marie Curie nurses, because when end-of-life care is delivered well, the benefits to the patient and the family are immeasurable; when it is delivered badly, it can cause considerable pain and distress to those involved.

Even though we have the excellent St Ann’s hospice in my constituency and we have one of the best hospitals in the country in Salford, I have dealt with cases in my constituency where end-of-life care has not been delivered as it should have been, leaving bereaved family members distressed and anguished. The National Council for Palliative Care has said that despite high aspirations, “there is still unacceptable variation, which would not be tolerated in any other area of practice.”

The ombudsman’s report shows us the consequences of people dying without access to high-quality care and support.

In my constituency I have had cases with similar failures to those that the ombudsman highlights—not recognising that the patient is dying, not responding to their needs, poor symptom control, poor communication and inadequate out-of-hours services. One of the cases I dealt with happened in 2005 and was included in a previous report by the ombudsman. Another occurred in 2013. It worries me that I have had constituents suffering the same heartache caused by poor end of life care when it is clear what needs to be done to improve their care.

My constituents died without dignity and in pain. Their carers and family members were left to run around trying to find suitable pain control for them, which meant that they lost the chance to spend precious time with the family member who was dying. The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), has just highlighted for us how important clinician support the co-ordination of care. Clearly, that would help in so many cases, and the idea was supported by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood).

We know that each year around 500,000 people die in England and Wales and half of those deaths occur in hospitals, so we must make sure that end-of-life care is fit for purpose in all settings and that staff are trained to recognise when someone is nearing the end of life. However, the End of Life Care Coalition tells us that NHS England has made no substantial move to invest in palliative or end-of-life care. Investment in those areas will remain restricted. In the previous Parliament the number of district nurses fell by 2,400, and many other community nursing posts, particularly senior posts, were cut. With such a hollowing out and deskilling of the community sector, I am concerned that the nurses who provide end-of-life care services are coming under increasing pressure, without the time or specialist skills to provide the quality care and compassion needed at the end of life.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) raised the serious issue of the level of cuts to adult social care. We know that we have already lost £4.6 billion from adult social care budgets since 2010. The King’s Fund, the Health Foundation and the Nuffield Trust have said that there will be a gap of around £3 billion in social care by the end of this Parliament. As we approach the Budget, it is important to acknowledge that the Government’s funding plans will not address that gap. The Local Government Association reported last week that councils are looking at council tax options that will raise only £370 million this year, which is less than the Government predicted. The promised better care funding is back-loaded, with nothing this year and only £100 million next year. In my local authority area, Salford, we will raise only £1.6 million this year, compared with cuts of £15 million since 2010.

GPs are also finding that they are under increasing pressure. In a recent survey, around 70% said that their workload is sometimes unmanageable, and over half said that the service they provide has deteriorated in the past year. One factor that is key to providing quality end-of-life care—we have heard about this in this debate—is ensuring that doctors and nurses have time to have the conversations needed with patients, families and other care providers, but the funding and staffing pressures I mentioned will not help staff to have time for those conversations.

The Health Committee’s report called for free adult social care at the end of life, and we made that a commitment in the Labour party manifesto, as my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) mentioned. In recommending that, there is clearly the issue of where we find the funding that we have talked about in this debate—is that offering better support in the community would mean fewer hospital admissions. Too many people approaching death are forced to spend long periods of time in hospital owing to a lack of social care or alternative support options, and that is unsustainable.

The Chair of the Health Committee referred to the Nuffield Trust’s evaluation of the Marie Curie nursing service, which found that people cared for by a Marie Curie nurse had total care at a cost of around £500 less per person, and hospital stays and costs were often avoided. Only 8% of Marie Curie patients died in hospital, compared with 42% of people without a Marie Curie
nurse. The End of Life Care Coalition thinks that those results can be replicated in other palliative care nursing services. Free adult social care at the end of life could also help to reduce the inequalities that currently exist in end of life care services due to age, gender, diagnosis, geography and deprivation, as has been mentioned.

We have heard that 88% of palliative care in-patients and 75% of new referrals were for people with a cancer diagnosis, even though cancer accounts for only around 29% of deaths. Older people receive less specialist palliative care than other age groups: only 16% is provided to people aged 85 or over, although 39% of deaths occur in that age group. We should be delivering services that enable someone living with dementia and someone living with cancer to receive the same quality of end-of-life care.

Will the Minister tell the House whether the Government will implement free social care for people nearing the end of life? The Opposition believe that altering the funding criteria for NHS continuing healthcare is not enough. He said in response to an earlier debate on end-of-life care:

“We have enough paper evidence. We know what looks good, how to make it happen and that it needs to happen, and we know that many people die in circumstances that leave much to be desired.”—[Official Report, 4 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 1089.]

We need action. We need a response to the “Choice” review, describing what action the Government will take on the key issues of choice, funding for end-of-life care and social care services, co-ordination and the identification and support of carers. If end-of-life care is the litmus test for health and social care services, we are currently failing it for too many people. We need good quality, compassionate end-of-life care to be available so that each person nearing the end of life can feel supported and safe in the knowledge that they will receive the very best care.

5.54 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): What a fantastic debate this has been on a most important subject, with many Members bringing their personal experiences to the attention of the House, and with such agreement on both sides about what constitutes good end-of-life care and what we need to do to improve the situation.

As Members on both sides have acknowledged, the situation is already very good. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) pointed out, The Economist recently rated end-of-life care in this country the finest in the world. The hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) said that fact made her proud to be British, and I am sure many others share that sentiment. My hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Poole (Mr Syms) said that our end-of-life care was a sign of Britain at its best, not just because we are doing well compared with other countries, but because that care exemplifies many of the qualities we cherish in our communities—community work, giving and generosity, especially in our hospice movement, which is unique to this country, and of which we are proud. There is, therefore, much to be proud about.

Our end-of-life care comes from a deep tradition, which, in its current incarnation, goes back to Dame Cicely Saunders, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) pointed out, but far further back too, into our medieval history. It is about care for the dying and an understanding, as many Members have pointed out, that the special time at the end of life should be cherished and that we should respect care at that time as much as we would other parts of people’s care.

However, as hon. Members also pointed out, there is much too much variation. The hon. Member for Burnley said that that in itself is something of which we should be ashamed, and I agree with her about that too. There is exceptional care in this country for people approaching the end of life, but there is also, I am afraid, care that is not good enough. Constituents have put that to hon. Members across the House, and we need to change that in this Parliament.

We need to eradicate the variation I mentioned: to quote Bevan, we need to universalise the best—that is one of the foundation stones of our NHS. Indeed, that was a promise made during the assisted dying debate. As the hon. Members for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) and for Central Ayrshire pointed out, exceptional palliative care is the foundation of all care in the NHS, and it should be the expectation of everyone reaching the end of their life. That is where I would like to start in responding to hon. Members’ remarks.

The quality of care we provide for people in hospitals and at home is a mark of how we think about the national health service and the care services we provide. We should not think of them purely as curative services; they work as curative services only if that cure is on a foundation of care, and that is why getting this issue right is so important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said that issue should be a priority, not just because of its importance in and of itself, but because it points to many of the efficiencies we can make in the health service and the care sector, which will free up money for care elsewhere in the sector.

The hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) said end-of-life care embodied compassion in the service, and that is why we should place especial importance on it. My hon. Friend the Member for Poole said that respect at the end of life was something all clinicians and all others involved in care should show. Again, if we are able to achieve that for people for whom there is no cure, we can also do something remarkable for those elsewhere in the service, for whom there is, happily, the prospect of a cure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) said we needed to make particular changes in different settings, whether that was improving privacy in hospitals, improving discharge to home or improving the ability to look after people in their permanent residence, be that at home or in a care home. We need to take a range of different approaches in order to eradicate the variation that so many hon. Members have talked about. People can be expected to achieve choice only if a consistent quality of care is offered in all settings.

Hon. Members have pointed out the need to address funding, and NHS England is looking at the different currencies of care. We need also to look at the measurement of how care is provided. I have taken note of the points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Totnes and for Faversham and Mid Kent about the need to produce consistent measurements for quality of care at a local level. I hope to be able to deal with that in the not too distant future.
We need to look at the accountability of clinicians. I point Members in the direction of the “gold line” offered by Airedale NHS Foundation Trust. I take very seriously the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who talked about named doctors, and refer him to the Secretary of State’s comments of 29 October where he expressly said that there should be a named consultant for patients in hospital. I hope that we will be able to extend that principle further afield, as we already have done in the course of the previous Parliament.

This matter should be addressed in a holistic manner. The hon. Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) mentioned the need for the care of young people to be accommodated within these plans, and I intend to take that forward. We also need to consider those who are very young.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) and for Erewash (Maggie Throup) referred to people who do not have cancer, especially those suffering from Parkinson’s disease and Alzheimer’s disease, falling out of the safety net in some areas. All those points were well made and will be taken into account.

I want to reflect on the comments of many Members about the importance of having a conversation. Professionals need to be brave, as my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash said. My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd mentioned the need for confidence from professionals and for education.

**Barbara Keeley:** It sounds as though the Minister is about to conclude his remarks, but he has not yet said when the Government will respond to the “Choice” review, which I asked about, as did several other Members. That is very important.

**Ben Gummer:** As I have made clear publicly, we will respond in short order to the “Choice” review, but I want to get this right. It is important that we make the content of the response as good as possible, and I do not want to compromise on that. Moreover, the hon. Lady’s party did not bring forward such a review.

This has been a very good debate on all sides. I am delighted by the cross-party support for the need to make changes. I hope that we will return to this debate in the weeks and months ahead and will be able to continue making a real change in the way that we approach death and end-of-life care in this country.

6.4 pm

**Dr Wollaston:** I thank all Members who have contributed to this debate and for making so many important points about how we can roll out the very best care and make it available to all of our constituents. I am disappointed that the Minister has not told us when he will respond to the “Choice” review, because it has been a year since its publication. As we have heard, a number of reports have set out what needs to be done. This is now the time for action and for the Minister to set out when it will take place.

**Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).**

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We have just concluded two days of debate on the Government’s estimates, but the estimated expenditure itself has not been debated. At 7 o’clock, we will be asked to authorise the Government’s spending plans for Departments of State—some £600 billion of public money—without there having been any debate whatsoever about them. How can that possibly be right, and what should Scottish Members of Parliament do now that we are effectively banned from voting on English-only legislation that may have a Barnett consequential? We were told that that would be considered in the estimates process, but we are not getting the chance—

**Mr Deputy Speaker** (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.
Welfare Reform and Work Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I must draw the House’s attention to the fact that financial privilege is involved in Lords amendments 8B, 8C, 9B and 9C.

Before Clause 4

6.7 pm

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendments 1B, 1C and 1D.

Mr Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take the Government motion to disagree with Lords amendments 8B and 8C and the Government motion to disagree with Lords amendments 9B and 9C.

Priti Patel: Lords amendments 1B, 1C and 1D place a duty on the Secretary of State to publish data annually on four low-income statistics. Let me start by being very clear about what the Government are not doing in these amendments: we are not returning to the broken state of affairs in the Child Poverty Act 2010; we are not returning to a policy approach driven by flawed income measures; and we are not compromising on the new life chances measures and the approach that we have set out in the Bill. Income measures do not drive the right action. They focus the Government’s finite resources on the symptoms of child poverty, not the root causes.

Let me be clear on what these amendments are about. They provide a further guarantee that information on low income will be made available for all to see, every year. We have repeatedly given commitments on that throughout the passage of the Bill, in both Houses. The “Households below average income” publication, which provides a range of low-income data, already has statutory protection as a national statistics product. We are now reinforcing that with a new statutory duty to publish those data annually. Three of the four income statistics—relative low income, combined low income and material deprivation, and absolute low income—are already routinely published in the HBAl publication.

Our commitment goes beyond the data that are already published. It will also place a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to publish new data annually on children living in persistent low-income households. The information will be based on a new data source, and the first figures will be published before the end of the 2016-17 financial year. We believe that those data are a useful addition, because they tell us about families who are stuck on low incomes.

However, although we have given full statutory guarantees that those low-income data will be published annually, we will not commit to the Government’s laying a report on them to Parliament. Reporting to Parliament on those statistics would incentivise Governments to take the wrong action and would simply continue to drive actions, such as direct income transfers, that fail to tackle the root causes of child poverty. The duty to publish low-income data is fundamentally different from reporting on or setting targets for them, and Opposition Members should not confuse the two.

We need to move away from the flawed “poverty plus a pound” approach that income measures incentivise. Resources are finite, and it is crucial that the Government prioritise the actions that will make the biggest difference to children. The evidence is clear that tackling worklessness and low educational attainment will make the biggest difference to children’s life chances. That is why the Government will report to Parliament on their life chances measures of worklessness and educational attainment every year.

We are also committed to publishing a number of non-statutory measures annually, including family stability, drug and alcohol dependence and problem debt, but we firmly believe that any move to report on those low-income measures would divide Government’s efforts and undermine the new life chances approach, which will bring about the transformative change that we all want to see. I urge hon. Members to support the motion to agree with amendments 1B, 1C and 1D.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is really unhelpful, when we look at poverty, to focus on relative income measures? If there is a recession and incomes fall, poverty will appear to have got better when it has actually got worse. We need to look differently at poverty and focus on its underlying causes rather than on relative income measures.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend highlights the fundamental purpose of the changes that we are making. We are focusing on the root causes: life chances, and key aspects such as worklessness and educational attainment.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I have two very quick points to make. First, if Governments over the next 10 years will have the resources that previous Governments had to drive their counter-poverty programme by increasing cash transfers. We might wish that it were different, but we need to grow up. Secondly, may I push the Minister further on whether the Government are open to looking at birth readiness, toddlerhood and school readiness as additional key indicators if we are, within existing resources, to make a real difference to the life chances of the poorest children?

Priti Patel: The right hon. Gentleman makes my point for me and, importantly, highlights the significance of the Government’s work on life chances. That will cover the whole range of ages, because it is of fundamental importance that the Government provide the right measures to support people throughout their lives.

I turn to the employment and support allowance work-related activity component, and the universal credit limited capability for work element measures. I remind the House why the changes are being made. As we stated when we last debated the measures, the change is urgently needed to ensure that the right incentives—and, importantly, support—are available to help more people with disabilities and health conditions to move closer to, and into, employment. We have experienced record employment levels and strong jobs growth over the past few years, but the benefits have bypassed the majority of those who are stuck on ESA. Only one in 100 ESA claimants in the WRAG moves off benefits each month, compared with one in five jobseeker’s allowance claimants.
That cannot be right, and the Government believe that people with health conditions and disabilities deserve better.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My understanding from our debate on the matter last week is that the Government intend to put an extra £100 million into supporting that group. However, will the Minister confirm that the savings she plans to make from the measure are much greater—some £600 million?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady will know from the Bill and the impact assessments the fiscal savings that will result from the measure. Fundamentally, we are making the change so that we can provide long-term support. For that reason, I think that all hon. Members will look forward to it.

We are committed to tackling the problem that too few people are moving off benefits and being supported into employment. There are economic, social and moral arguments for ensuring that those who are able to work can work, and that they are supported into work. Work is the most effective way to improve the wellbeing of individuals, their families and their communities.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Government’s equality watchdog has said that there is “very little in the way of evidence” to show that what the Government are trying to do will support disabled people back into work. In the last five years, the number of working-age disabled people has fallen, and the Government speak from a track record of failure. Are disabled people not right to be sceptical about what is about to happen? What direct evidence can the Minister offer about the support that will be delivered to disabled people?

Priti Patel: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware from his participation in the Public Bill Committee and during the Bill’s passage through the House, the Government are committed to bringing in reforms. As I will shortly come on to say, the reforms will be set out in a White Paper later this year. Importantly—we are optimistic; we really are—the White Paper will outline the reforms that will shortly come on to say, the reforms will be set out in a White Paper later this year. Importantly—we are optimistic; we really are—the White Paper will outline our plans to reform further the help to support people with health conditions and disabilities into work.

6.15 pm

A large body of evidence shows that work is good for physical and mental wellbeing. There is also a growing awareness, as I am sure all Members recognise, that long-term worklessness is harmful to both physical and mental health. Reform is therefore vital in itself, but we will go further. We are ambitious; we do not believe in writing people off. Importantly, we will ensure that the welfare system incentives and supports people into employment.

Neil Coyle rose—

Priti Patel: I will give way one more time.

Neil Coyle: In the past five years—in fact, in the past six years, during which the coalition and this Government have been in office—the number of disabled people of working age in work has fallen. The Government have closed Remploy factories, the number of disability employment advisers in Jobcentre Plus has fallen by 20% and the number of people supported by the Access to Work programme has fallen.

Priti Patel: I will repeat my starting premise: we are more positive and optimistic for people with health conditions and disabilities. Support through the Access to Work programme has increased. We have great initiatives, such as the Disability Confident campaign, which is supporting people back into work. The hon. Gentleman may want to join us, perhaps by hosting a Disability Confident event in his constituency. I would very much welcome such support. I think that we should be optimists. This Government are committed to halving the employment disability gap, which all Members of the House should welcome.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister’s ambition, which I share, to halve the employment disability gap, and the pathway that will be a crucial part of the White Paper. Will she provide reassurance that the good intentions in relation to the Lords amendments—identifying those affected in the work-related activity group, the impact on them and their wellbeing, and having better information, as well as tailored support—will very much be part of the imminent White Paper? Can we have some reassurance about that process before the changes start to have an impact?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He will know this, but let me tell the House that I have met a number of colleagues who, quite rightly, want to know more about the White Paper. In relation to the changes that will be made, they have expressed concerns about the content and direction of the White Paper. I want to make it clear that this is an ongoing dialogue. I will continue to engage with all colleagues in the House, as well as stakeholders and charities, which have a valuable contribution to make and are interested in this area. In particular, my hon. Friend and my hon. Friends the Members for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland), for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) have raised with me their desire for the reforms to produce the right outcome. I and the Government share that desire. Importantly, we will work together to make sure that we get the right outcomes.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Priti Patel: I will not give way. We are pressed for time, so I want to make some progress.

As the Secretary of State said last summer, the purpose of the reforms is to ensure that we give people with disabilities and health conditions the appropriate and necessary support that they need to move them closer to the labour market and to support them into work. We are basing all that we do around what works for them. Importantly, as applies to the other amendments, we are focused particularly on life chances.

I will, if I may, move on to the debate in the other place. I can report that, since we last met, the other place has chosen not to insist on its amendments 8 and 9, which removed the changes to the ESA WRAG and the UC LCW element. However, it has agreed what is in
effect a wrecking amendment, because it could in practice prevent the provisions from coming into force, despite the fact that my noble Friend and colleague Lord Freud committed to several additional measures to help those affected by the change, which addressed a number of the specific requests raised in the Lords.

Let me set out the extra measures we have committed to in the other place. First, the additional measures include an additional £15 million in 2017-18, when the changes to the ESA WRAG and the UC LCW element come into force, to increase the local Jobcentre flexible support fund. The money, which will be set aside specifically for those with limited capability for work, represents a 22% increase in the overall fund.

Secondly, in response to the concerns that were raised about claimants with progressive conditions, we have committed to improving the awareness of the reassessment process and the guidance for claimants and disability charities about reassessments. We will provide additional support and training to jobcentre staff to ensure that they are aware that they may need to talk about requests for reassessments with claimants with deteriorating conditions.

Finally, we will improve the work incentives for those who continue to receive ESA even further by removing the 52-week limit that applies to permitted work for those in the ESA WRAG. That will allow claimants to gain skills and experience and to build their confidence, while still receiving the benefit over a longer period. We will support these individuals to get back into work.

As I said earlier, despite those additional measures, the other place proceeded with amendments that ignore the clear voice of this democratically elected House, which has supported the changes to the ESA WRAG and the UC LCW element, and the fact that we have voted on this measure five times. Although, on the face of it, the amendments may appear to be reasonable, let me set out how they are, in effect, potentially wrecking amendments.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Priti Patel: I will proceed, because we have very little time. The right hon. Gentleman will get the chance to speak once all the introductory speeches have been made.

First, the amendments would require the Secretary of State to publish a report on the impact of the changes prior to the changes being made, and not to introduce the reform until the report had been published. Specifically, the report would be about the impacts on a person’s health, finances and ability to return to work. In line with normal practice, we of course intend to evaluate this change.

My noble Friend Lord Freud has confirmed in the other place that we will monitor the impact through regular national statistics. However, it will be impossible to provide the majority of the information requested in the amendments through our analysis prior to implementation, because the data that are currently available do not allow us to make any meaningful estimate. That means that the amendments would delay the implementation of the measure by four years and cost more than £1 billion of the savings for which this democratically elected House has voted.

The amendments would not only impact on the savings associated with this change, but would hinder the Government in their commitment to do the right thing by providing the right incentives and supporting people with health conditions and disabilities to allow them to improve their life chances, fulfil their potential and get the vital support that they need to enable them to get back to work.

Secondly, the amendments are unacceptable because they seek to require that the commencement regulations be made under the affirmative resolution procedure. At best, that is a delaying tactic that runs contrary to usual parliamentary process. In practice, it would allow the Lords to block the legislation by the back door. I am sure that I am not alone in thinking that the Lords has overstepped the mark on this.

This House voted convincingly for the changes on 23 February. That was the fifth time this House had voted overwhelmingly for this reform—a reform that is financially privileged and that is a key part of our efforts to reform the welfare system by supporting more people into work.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I apologise at the outset for the fact that I will not take interventions, but a lot of people want to make speeches and not everybody got in last week. Also, I am not sure that my voice will hold for very long.

I will speak to Lords amendments 1B, 1C and 1D on child poverty reporting and to Lords amendments 8B, 8C, 9B and 9C on the proposed cuts to the employment and support allowance work-related activity component and its equivalent in universal credit.

On Lords amendments 1B, 1C and 1D, I was going to welcome the Minister’s agreement to publish the percentage of children living in poverty in the way originally described in the Child Poverty Act 2010, based on household income and material deprivation. However, I found the tone that she took in introducing the debate very regrettable. I also regret that the Government have not conceded to the request to submit an annual report to Parliament on the progress on these measures.

As I argued last week, we cannot deny the fact that in relation to child poverty, income matters. As experts in child poverty and child health have stressed in recent weeks and months, it is entirely regrettable that the Government are trying to conflate the consequences of child poverty, for example debt and family breakdown, with the cause—a lack of material resources. I have to disagree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field): there is no evidence to support the Government’s proposed interventions. They are likely to have no effect on child poverty and they may even make things worse. Contrary to that, support such as income supplements has been shown to be highly effective.

The Government’s predilection for focusing on worklessness, when two thirds of children living in poverty are from working families, reveals exactly where they are coming from. It is about hammering the poor, whether they are in work or not. As I predicted last week, and as yesterday’s Institute for Fiscal Studies report shows, the net effect of tax and social security changes will increase the proportion of children in relative poverty by eight percentage points, and those in
absolute poverty by three percentage points by 2020. That means that one in four—2.6 million—of our children will live in poverty. The implications for those children and their families, but also for the country, are stark.

Growing up in poverty limits children’s potential and development across a range of areas. Brain scans show how children’s brains develop differently when children are subjected to poverty. Poverty leads to poor health and life chances in adulthood, and that has knock-on effects for future generations. We already have the highest mortality of children under five in western Europe, and children from poor families are five times more likely to die than children from rich families. We all need to reflect on that; it should be a concern for us all.

Let me deal with amendments 8B, 8C, 9B and 9C. On Monday, the House of Lords voted overwhelmingly for Lord Low’s amendment calling for an assessment of the effects of the proposed measures to reduce social security support for people with disability, impairment or a serious health condition who had been found not fit for work and placed in the ESA WRAG group. In particular, the amendment called for an assessment of the impact on disabled people’s physical and mental health, their financial position—we know that disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-disabled people, and 80% of that is due to their disability—and their ability to return to work.

To refresh people’s memory, the Government propose to cut financial support from £102.15 to £73.10—nearly £30 a week or £1,500 a year—for new ESA WRAG claimants from 2017. However, that will also apply to existing WRAG claimants. In April, nearly half a million people who are currently on ESA WRAG will start to migrate to universal credit, and the Government intend to remove the limited capability for work component of the work element of universal credit. That means that everyone currently on ESA WRAG will ultimately be transferred to UC and have their support reduced by that £29.05 a week or £1,500 a year.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Debbie Abrahams: If my hon. Friend will excuse me, I will not. I said that I would not give way, and I want to be fair and consistent.

As Baroness Grey-Thompson pointed out on Monday, the cuts will also affect disabled people in low paid work, who will receive less under universal credit. I acknowledge the Government’s concessions in the increase in support to the jobcentre flexible support fund of an extra £15 million in the coming year. However, the payments are flexible and discretionary. I also acknowledge the removal of the 52-week limit on permitted work in ESA and some protection for people with progressive conditions, but they are frankly inadequate.

On the health issues that people on ESA face, we know from the Government’s published data from last year that the death rates of people on incapacity benefit/ESA in 2013 was 4.3 times greater than those of the general population. That is an increase of 25% since 2003. People in the support group are 6.3 times more likely to die than the general population, and those in the WRAG group—the people whom we are saying that we will take this money from—are 2.2 times more likely to die than the general population.

6.30 pm

The innuendo that people with a disability or illness might be faking it or are feckless, and need incentivising into work by having their support cut, is frankly grotesque and belies the epidemiological data. Incapacity benefit and ESA are recognised as good population health indicators, and the release of the Government’s own data proves that point. This vulnerable group of people need our care and support, not humiliation.

There is a real risk that these cuts will exacerbate the health and well-being of this vulnerable group of people. The concession that allows disabled people to ask for a reassessment of their work capability assessment is a process that eminent academics in a peer-reviewed journal estimate to be associated with severe adverse mental health effects, including 590 additional suicides between 2011 and 2013. That is hardly reassuring.

All that we know from the Government’s impact assessment is that by 2020-21 approximately £640 million a year will have been cut from social security support to disabled people, with £100 million a year to provide unspecified support to help disabled people into work. That is on top of the £23.8 billion that has already been cut from 3.7 million people by the Welfare Reform Act 2012, and it does not include cuts that affect disabled people in social care, education, housing, transport or access to justice. Some 5.1 million disabled people are living in poverty, and last year that number increased by 2%, which is equivalent to 300,000 people. There is no assessment of what this Bill will do to the financial position of disabled people.

Although this is the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, it contains nothing about work. There is nothing about how many disabled people will get into work, or how many extra employers will be involved to reduce the disability employment gap. That is all pushed down the road to the White Paper. As Baroness Campbell said on Monday, “the Government are demanding a massive leap of faith as financial support to disabled people is cut before publishing details of what a reformed employment and support system will look like.”

I also reject the content of the Secretary of State’s letter to Conservative MPs last night, and what we have just heard from the Minister, and the suggestion that the Lords have abused parliamentary process and that the impact assessment is too difficult to do. I suggest that the Secretary of State comes to the Dispatch Box to say that—it is absolute rubbish. He is putting as much spin into the Bill as he is into the EU referendum.

The notion put forward by the Secretary of State is that their Lordships are somehow usurping parliamentary procedure and doing something illegitimate, but in fact they are following parliamentary procedure. Ping-pong, as it is affectionately known, is a fundamental and recognised part of the legislative process. All that their lordships are doing is what every constituent expects their MP, as a legislator, to do, which is to know and understand the impact on their constituents of the laws they vote for. We expect our Government to take their responsibility seriously and provide evidence of the impact of the proposed legislation.
The Secretary of State claims that his Department cannot make a comprehensive assessment of the Bill, but he does not stack up. Five months ago, the Equality and Human Rights Commission wrote to the Minister to say exactly how such an assessment could be undertaken, and it even offered the expertise of its staff to do that. Again, the Secretary of State refused, but any responsible Government should undertake such work. Today MPs are effectively voting on whether they want to make a life-changing decision for their constituents, in the dark or with an understanding of the consequences. It is obvious what their constituents expect, and what they should do.

Lord Low, Baroness Grey-Thompson and Baroness Meacher’s report raised the issue of the impact assessment, as have disability charities, disabled people and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. In correspondence to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff), the EHRC said:

“We consider that the Government’s impact assessments make very little attempt to set out comprehensively how the three aims of the—
public sector equality—
“duty have been considered. On 16 September 2015, the Commission wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to set out our concerns about the impact assessments for the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. We believe the assessments would benefit from a more detailed consideration of the likely impact of the proposals on people with different protected characteristics. They contain very little in the way of evidence and this limits the accompanying analysis and the scope for parliamentary scrutiny and informed decision-making on the proposed legislative changes.”

I am most concerned that the Government have failed to fulfil their public sector equality duty. Under the Equality Act 2010, the Government must properly consider the impact of their policies on the elimination of discrimination, the advancement of equality of opportunity and the fostering of good relations. Supporting the amendments will help to put that right. I urge Members on both sides of the House to support the amendments.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate once again. I know that time is very short, so I will keep my remarks short and speak to Lords amendments 8B and 9B.

I would like to begin by thanking the Minister for the movement she has made so far on the flexible support fund and scrapping the 52-week permitted work limit. That is very welcome and a good move in the right direction. Although I disagree with the Government on this issue and I voted against the Government last week, I am concerned that this ping-pong is evolving into petty politics that is constraining the issue we should be discussing, which is the reform of welfare on a very technical point.

The Lords amendments are based on the amendment my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and I tabled on Report. I would have welcomed that amendment coming back last week, as opposed to this week. We have spent a lot of time on this amendment. I will be voting against the Government tonight, but I feel we should be putting this behind us and moving forward to discuss the White Paper. I want the Minister to be aware that I will be publishing a Green Paper and inviting colleagues who are also concerned to contribute to it, so we can broaden the horizon out on what we would like in terms of welfare reform.

I want to reiterate the fact that the Conservative party considers it its proud duty to look after the disabled in our community. The Conservatives are very happy, ideologically, to provide a welfare state that helps those in need. When people fall on hard times, we will look after them. Nobody is trying to punish anybody in the Bill or in the amendments we are discussing. The reality is that my Conservative colleagues and I want to get to the same position as the Government, which is to help as many disabled people as possible who want to work to get back into work.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen McPartland: I am not going to give way, simply because we are short of time.

In my view, the Work programme has failed. One out of 100 people are moving off it. That is our failure, not the failure of the people on the programme. We all want a fix. We want to get as many disabled people who want to work back into work. We just disagree on how we achieve that. I hope our Green Paper will help the Government to publish their White Paper. I genuinely think we would not have been in this position if the White Paper had been brought forward already and we were not having to take on faith something we are not really sure is going to happen, who the Ministers will be, who will be in charge of the money, and how we are going to move forward for these disabled people.

I want to reassure my constituents in the ESA WRAG that the changes apply only to new claimants from 1 April 2017. There has been a lot of confusion about that in my postbag and I want to reassure my constituents on that.

I will vote against the Government tonight, but I hope it will be for the last time on this particular issue.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland). We use the word “honourable” in this House far too often, but in this case he has been very honourable in the way he has approached this particular subject.

In the brief time available to us this evening, I hope I can set out the clear reasons why the House must accept Lords amendments 8B, 8C, 9B and 9C tonight. Let me first say that I welcome the Government’s partial change of heart to place the reporting of income-related child poverty on a statutory footing. Amendments 1B, 1C and 1D are not perfect, but they at least represent some progress. I hope that Conservative Members will now see the merits of accepting other arguments made by the Opposition regarding ESA and the work component of universal credit.

Last week, I was invited to sit on the Reasons Committee after we voted and rejected the previous Lords amendments. For those unfamiliar with it, the Committee meets immediately after the vote and agrees the reason to be articulated to the Lords from the Government as to why their amendments were refused. On ESA and universal credit amendments, the reasons were exactly the same:

“Because it would alter the financial arrangements made by the Commons; and the Commons do not offer any further Reason, trusting that this Reason may be deemed sufficient.”
So the Commons did not offer “any further Reason”, which I found shocking. The Government could not come up with anything else to say—no empirical evidence, no logical argument, nothing socially responsible or of any consequence. It relied on a pseudo-constitutional technicality to explain the decision to remove £30 a week from the pockets of sick and disabled people on ESA WRAG. Ping-pong is being used and abused as an excuse in this regard. What message does that send from this Government to ESA recipients? It says, “We don’t need to justify why we are cutting your ESA, we just are. We just can and we just will. We trust that this reason may be deemed sufficient.”

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: I am sorry, but time is tight and other right hon. and hon. Members have refused to take interventions. As I was saying, the Government said that they trusted their reason “be deemed sufficient”. There is, of course, nothing to say because this Government have not done their homework. The impact assessment has not been done. The Government have no idea how this will impact on claimants, their health or their ability to progress towards work. Tonight, the Government will not have that technicality to fall back on. The revised amendments from the Lords ask the Government to provide the impact assessment that should have been done right at the start of this process and for it to be scrutinised before any cut to ESA would be forthcoming.

This amendment from Lord Low and his colleagues sets a challenge to this Minister and her Government. It sets a challenge to accept the amendment or do a better job of reasoning why the amendment should be opposed. It does not cost the Government any extra money; it just asks for them to do the work they should have done before even bringing these proposals to the House.

Some Conservatives voted with the Government last week, holding their nose. They did so on the “jam tomorrow” promise dangled by the Government in the shape and form of the much vaunted White Paper on health and work. Surely Conservative Members must now be asking whether the cart is being put before the horse. Why not publish the White Paper and explain what is going to replace this damaging cut to the incomes of sick and disabled people? Such a radical cut to social security for sick and disabled recipients merits at least that.

We should also consider the various court cases being brought against this Government regarding their welfare cuts—the bedroom tax, and carer’s allowance as part of the benefit cap. And the UN is investigating the cuts in general. By not doing their homework on cuts to ESA and universal credit and by not producing an impact assessment, the Government risk being dragged to court at great expense to the taxpayer once again and at great embarrassment to themselves once again.

I would rather have seen passed the amendments we tabled at the end of last year or those we considered last week. The Government won the votes on those occasions, but this is back before us tonight from the House of Lords. Universal opposition from disability groups and third sector organisations remains, while the fact that so many compassionate Conservative Members are thinking of voting against the Government tonight shows they have not won the argument. They have not convinced us that these cuts should happen before an impact assessment has been scrutinised, and they have not convinced us that these cuts should happen before the alternative in their White Paper has even been presented.

Given the apparent importance of this issue to the Government, the fact that the amendments are tabled in the name of the Secretary of State and that so many Conservatives are so close to voting against him, one would have thought that we would see the Secretary of State in his place this evening—if not at the Dispatch Box, at least somewhere on the Government Benches to show that he is not taking his Back Benchers for granted. He failed to attend the debate last week, and he has failed to appear again tonight. He has shown disrespect to the House, disrespect to his Conservative colleagues, and a blatant disregard for ESA and universal credit recipients whose support is due to be cut. As we heard from the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), he has apparently already written to his Back Benchers in a last-ditch attempt to shore up support, saying that the impact assessments satisfy the Equality and Human Rights Commission. That is simply not true: the commission says that they do not.

6.45 pm

I understand that Conservative Members may not wish to agree with what I have to say, or indeed with what is said by those on the Labour Front Bench, but this matter is too important for them not to listen to what is said by those will be affected by the cuts. Last week, I quoted from an excellent speech made by Baroness Grey-Thompson.

Tanni Grey-Thompson, an 11-times wheelchair racing gold medallist, has no political axe to grind; she has no interest in giving the Government a bloody nose for the sake of it. She has campaigned hard on this issue because she can see the impact that the cuts will have. On Monday night, she said:

“Many people are already close to crisis point. They feel so beaten up by the changes that they are finding it hard to articulate. It is not that they do not care. They just do not have the energy left and are just trying to survive.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 29 February 2016; Vol. 769, c. 607-8.]”

I could reel off any number of quotations from third sector organisations that have been mentioned in previous debates, and we agree with what they have said. Last week the Minister said that she had worked with them, but they remain concerned about the cuts, and we have to ask ourselves why. They have drawn attention to the impact that those cuts will have on the people they represent. I implore Conservative Members to consider what they have to say, and to weigh that expert evidence against the Government’s failure to provide any evidence at all.

The amendments offer a sensible opportunity for the Government to take stock, gather the evidence relating to a cut of £30 per week for those who are sick and disabled, and explain in detail what replacement they propose. Surely if DWP Ministers have confidence in their arguments, they will have no problem supplying the necessary evidence to the House, and to those who will suffer the impact of these cuts.
Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. There are 18 minutes left before the debate must end. I trust that no Member will speak for more than two minutes, as a courtesy to other Members.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Playing ping-pong with the other place, or receiving a Lords message, sounds rather genteel and polite, doesn’t it? However, I ask all Members almost to divorce their thinking from the issue on which we shall be voting later. Dare I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) pointed out in her excellent speech. A letter from the commission’s shadow Minister, that virtually everything they said was an irrelevance? The House has already debated the point, and, as my right hon. Friend the Minister noted, we have voted on it on five occasions and have voted in the affirmative. We are now concerned with a much bigger issue, which should, in my judgment, unite all quarters of the House: the issue of the supremacy of this place as the elected House of Commons. As we know, in the last century the House had exactly the same debate on the people’s Budget.

The Minister was right. The Lords amendments are wrecking amendments, and the unelectable seem to be relying on the unelected to try to frustrate the policies and the position of Her Majesty’s Government, which was well articulated during the general election campaign and has been debated incredibly thoroughly in the House and elsewhere. Last night the House of Lords played a very dangerous game. It said to the democratically accountable House of Parliament in this country, “We know better than you, the electorate; we know better than you, the elected Government.” We are on the cusp—issue apart—of a constitutional conundrum which will not end easily for the upper House. The authority of this place is now under significant and serious challenge. It is time for parties to unite, and for us to exercise and exert our supremacy in a democratic Parliament.

Stephen Timms: I think that the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) must be rather inexperienced in the procedures of Parliament, because ping-pong is a well-established feature of our proceedings. I welcome the change of heart on the publication of child poverty indicators, but I am very disappointed by the position that the Minister has taken on the Lords amendments on the employment and support allowance. It is a shame that the Secretary of State is not here tonight. As we have heard, he has written to Back-Bench Conservative Members to tell them that it is “impossible to provide” the information that is required. However, that is not what the Equality and Human Rights Commission says, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) pointed out in her excellent speech. A letter from the commission’s chief executive dated 16 September last year made this point:

“Assessments need to include sufficient detail and analysis to demonstrate that the draft proposals have been adequately considered for their potential impact on equality. We have considerable expertise in this area”.

However, the Secretary of State rejected its offer of help and now says that it is impossible to provide the information. It is perfectly possible to provide that information, but Ministers do not wish to provide it because the House would then be able to see what the effects would be.

An attempt has been made to present these changes as in the interests of disabled people, but they are not supported by a single one of the organisations representing disabled people. Parkinson’s UK has made its position very clear:

“The policy is likely to have a significant, harmful impact on the health and wellbeing of people with Parkinson’s.”

Macmillan Cancer Support states:

“Macmillan strongly opposes the proposed reductions because of the negative impact they will have on people affected by cancer and other long-term conditions.”

The judgment that the House has to make tonight is whether Ministers are speaking for disabled people or whether the organisations representing disabled people are speaking for them. I hope that the House will choose in favour of the latter.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): This is a very important debate. It is important to note that these changes relating to the provision of the employment and support allowance work-related activity component will have no impact on existing claimants. They will apply only to new claimants and to claims made after April next year.

Additionally, the Government have said that they will publish a White Paper this spring detailing how they plan to improve support for people with health conditions and disabilities. I look forward to seeing what is in that White Paper, particularly on the role of employers in reducing the disability employment gap. I carried out my fifth jobs and apprenticeships fair in my constituency recently, and the 40 employers I spoke to all agreed that they would commit to a Disability Confident-aware fair, which is what I will hold this year. I am going to play my part, and everybody in this House has a role to play in helping people who wish to get into work.

There is an overwhelming body of evidence that work is generally good for physical and mental wellbeing, and 61% of those in work-related activity groups say that they want to work. The existing policy set up by Labour in 2008 is failing those claimants. Despite £2.7 billion being spent this year supporting those in the ESA work-related activity group, just 1% of the WRAG claimants moved off ESA each month. The policy is clearly not working, and we need a better system than this.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I urge the Government to remember that, by their own definition, claimants receiving work-related ESA are not capable of work at that time. They are people the Government’s own work capability assessment has deemed not to be fit for work. Surely it is therefore preposterous that the Government think they can cure those people’s complex and long-term ailments and miraculously incentivise them to return to work by reducing their financial support.

If implemented, these cuts will surely also hinder the Government’s ambition to halve the disability employment gap. Instead, they will push many disabled people further into poverty and have a significant and harmful impact on the health and wellbeing of many people, including many in my constituency. As has been mentioned, a Macmillan survey of nearly 1,000 people living with cancer recently found that one in 10 would be unable, or would struggle, to pay their rent or mortgage if they lost...
£30 a week. How can this Government think it is acceptable to risk cancer patients losing their homes as a result of these cuts? Surely, as has been said by many hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland), who spoke articulately and with such passion and principle, it is time to listen to Macmillan, Scope, Sense and Parkinson's UK, to the many experts who have lined up and to the recommendations of the parliamentary review of the proposed cuts and reverse the removal of the work-related ESA component—and the equivalent payment under universal credit—as proposed by these amendments. It is also surely time for a thorough impact assessment of the proposed changes before they come into effect.

Finally, instead of cutting these life-saving benefits, the Government should, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has so clearly articulated, put in place much more effective back-to-work support and provide more disability employment advisers to help these people deal properly with the barriers they face. We should not be punishing some of the most vulnerable people in our country—we should be giving them a helping hand.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): When I spoke on this matter in this House a week ago, I referred to the issue of the publication of data and the Lords amendments then before us. I recall saying, in answer to an intervention from an Opposition Member, that I felt sure the Minister for Employment, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) would be giving an assurance that the Government would be guaranteeing that the sort of data that the Labour party was asking for would be guaranteed and would be published annually. Lo and behold, that is what has happened. She has been absolutely correct in making that concession to the Lords, and the resulting Lords amendments 1B, 1C and 1D are to be welcomed. I hope we can all support them this evening.

On the other Lords amendments, 8B, 8C, 9B and 9C, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) has articulated the parliamentary process. I will not go through any more of those arguments, but it is clearly the fact that this House—the democratically elected House—has quite properly voted on these matters on many occasions. I served on the Bill Committee, along with the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for many occasions last autumn, and all these issues have been discussed in full and passed by this House.

Rather than the process, what is important to remember is this: everybody, on both sides of this House, wants to do the right thing. This Government have at the heart of their policy the fact that we will ensure that those with long-term illnesses or physical or mental disabilities will get all the help that they need to move closer to work. Of course that is the right approach, and it is the essence of the Government's policy.

While on the issue, I should say that I am holding a Disability Confidence event this Friday in my constituency, with the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), and that shows that with a rounded package of measures, this Government are absolutely committed to helping those who need the most support to get closer to work. It is time to get these measures on the statute book.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The proposal to cut the incomes of people on ESA WRAG by £1,500 is one of the most mean-spirited yet from this Government. The fact that the cut applies only to new claimants, in a little over a year’s time, demonstrates the unease Ministers have about it and their hope—a vain one—that it applies only to new claimants, somehow people will not notice. The fact is that Ministers are looking for large savings at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable. That was not made clear in the general election campaign; then, the Prime Minister said that disabled people would be protected.

The Minister said that she was going to spend another £100 million on supporting these people. If her scheme was going to work, she would not need to cut this £30 from such people’s weekly income, because she would get the savings as they all moved into work. This is doomed to fail and the Minister knows it. If she was convinced that it was going to work, she would do the impact assessment, because she would be confident of the upshot. She is not doing so, and she is ignoring the very real impact that this will have on the health of the most vulnerable of our fellow citizens.

7 pm

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am in complete support of my right hon. Friend the Minister and entirely in disagreement with the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who is a very civilised gentleman. When he said that this was a pseudo-constitutional issue, he could not have been more wrong. This House’s democratic authority is wholly based on financial privilege, which is why, when we reject amendments that engage financial privilege, we give no further reason. Not only is that important to the current Government, but it will be important to the Opposition when they are in government, too. If the House of Lords can challenge the Commons on matters of financial privilege, then the country becomes ungovernable. Those who have the democratic mandate have a right, because of the people whom they represent, to determine issues relating to finance. The other place is increasingly trespassing on that right. The amendment that it passed in lieu decided to give it the right to consider the secondary legislation on a financial matter, which it does not need to do; it has taken it from primary to secondary, upgrading their role on a financial matter. Constitutionally, that is quite wrong. Any Member of this House who thinks that, one day, he may speak from the Treasury Bench Dispatch Box should bear in mind the importance of ensuring that the constitutional norms are maintained.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): There are plenty of cameras in this place, but they do not always pick up what is going on across the Chamber. When my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) was speaking, the Minister was engaged in conversation with a person to her immediate left. I am not sure whether that conversation was related to the debate in hand, but they thought it fit to laugh during the debate when the true impact of these cuts on the people who can least afford them was
being laid out. Either the Minister was not paying attention to the debate because of disinterest, or she thought that what was being laid out was funny. Either way, she should be ashamed of herself.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): The first thing that I did when I was elected to this place in 2010 was to attend a dinner in honour of Alf Morris, the first disabled Minister, to celebrate the passing of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970. At that dinner, I sat between Roger Berry, the former MP for Kingswood, and the late Paul Goggins, the former MP for Wythenshawe. Both were excellent Labour disability Ministers, who did a superb job. Also there was William Hague, who brought in the disability living allowance. What that brought home to me was that the only time that real progress is made on disability issues is when there is a spirit of bipartisanship in this Chamber. On this particular issue, that bipartisanship is clearly lacking.

For the past six years—I’ll interrupt. Will the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) please be quiet? Her behaviour now reminds me why I chose not to vote for her for the Public Accounts Committee. She is showing me no courtesy at all.

For six years now, I have believed that we need to improve our support for those with a disability. There is a crying need for reform. We now have a White Paper. I want us all to engage in the process, not just to sit there. I was proud to stand on a manifesto that promised to halve the disability employment gap. Nothing would upset me more than to think that Opposition Members actively want us to fail in that goal, because they see some sort of short-term political gain. They owe it to their constituents and to the country to help us achieve our goal, and I do not think that some of them want to do that.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The cuts to employment and support allowance—

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have just heard a Government Member pray in aid my right hon. Friend Paul Goggins, who is dead, and try to include him on the Government’s side of the argument. It is terribly wrong to do that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Thank you. I call Mr Barry Gardiner.

Barry Gardiner: The cuts to employment and support allowance will make the lives of disabled people harder, the lives of those with mental, cognitive and behavioural difficulties harder, and the lives of those with progressive or fluctuating conditions harder. There are 9,290 people in receipt of employment and support allowance in my borough, Brent. In 2012 one of my constituents was in receipt of employment and support allowance in my borough, Brent. In 2012 one of my constituents was in receipt of employment and support allowance. One was an 18-year-old girl, who had been a social worker in Denmark before she came to the UK. She had cancer, and had been diagnosed with cancer and she was on treatment. She was entitled to incapacity benefit, but she was not entitled to employment and support allowance. She was supposed to be receiving that for 12 months, and it was 11 months until she was on that. She is showing me no courtesy at all.

Barbara Keeley: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that Labour Members of Parliament, like me, have been extremely concerned about the impact of the Government’s welfare reform policies, and that we have written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and to the now Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and to the Minister, to express concern about the passing of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970. We have written to the Minister, and we have called for a further White Paper, which the Minister promised. I am not sure that the Minister’s words today are sufficient to change my mind.

Barry Gardiner: The purpose of the amendment is to remove the conditionality and the sanctions that we have seen since the introduction of the Disability Living Allowance. That is clear. That is what it is doing. The amendment is not simply to remove the conditionality and the sanctions from the Disability Living Allowance; it is to remove the conditionality and the sanctions from the Employment and Support Allowance. The amendment is clear.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) is calling for a debate on that matter at another time. I shall not allow him to do that, because we are on Amendment 1B.

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83G), That Lords amendments 1B, 1C and 1D be made.

Motion made, and Question put. That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 8B and 8C.—[Priti Patel.]
Ayes 309, Noes 275.

Clause 14

Universal credit: limited capability for work element

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 9B and 9C.—[Priti Patel.]

The House divided: Ayes 309, Noes 275.

Division No. 204

[7.19 pm]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afryie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bowick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve

Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Vaz, Valerie
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eiliidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Sue Hayman

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 8B and 8C disagreed to.
Dinenage, Caroline
Djungly, Mr Jonathan
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Ephicte, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, rh Mr Nigel
Evannett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Ford, rh Dr Liam
François, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Gandhi, rh Sir Edward
Garner, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillian, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew
Handyside, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heat-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollnraeke, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Mr Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Rh Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
 Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leigh, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughnane, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCarty, Karl
McLaughlin, rh Mr Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milting, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poultter, Dr Daniel
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Rab, rh Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shellbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Souby, rh Anna
Sperman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swaine, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Symms, rh Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tohurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, rh Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shai
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warmman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim
Tellers for the Ayes:
Simon Kirby and
Jackie Doyle-Price

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Allen, Heidi
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Bettes, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinesop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendments 9B and 9C disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H). That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 8B, 8C, 9B and 9C.

That Debbie Abrahams, Neil Gray, Holly Lynch, Guy Opperman, Priti Patel, David Rutley and Helen Whately be members of the Committee;

That Priti Patel be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee;

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Guy Opperman.)

Question agreed to.

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Tellers for the Noes:
Vicky Foxcroft and Sue Hayman
SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Question put,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2016, for expenditure by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office:

(1) the resources authorised for use for current purposes be reduced by £20,292,000 as set out in HC 747;

(2) further resources, not exceeding £33,171,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £16,879,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

The House divided: Ayes 305, Noes 55.

Division No. 205] [7.33 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshire, rh James
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Mehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi

Estimates 2015-16
The Deputy Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54 (6)).

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Supplementary Estimate

Division No. 205

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brookshire, rh James
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burrowes, Mr David
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Cartidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Mehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kinahan, Danny
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi

Lancaster, Mark
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Oxford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Perce, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin

1069
2 MARCH 2016
Estimates 2015-16
1070
Resolved, That, for the year ending with 31 March 2016, for expenditure by the Home Office:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £256,729,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 747,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £356,056,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,328,197,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

Resolved, That, for the year ending with 31 March 2016, for expenditure by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills:

(1) the resources authorised for use for current purposes be reduced by £7,152,214,000 as so set out in HC 747,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £195,006,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £72,412,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

Resolved, That for the year ending with 31 March 2016, for expenditure by the Department of Health:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £25,869,317,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 747,

(2) the resources authorised for use for capital purposes be reduced by £945,313,000 as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £252,304,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Questions on the outstanding Estimates (Standing Order No. 55).

Resolved, That, during the year ending with 31 March 2016, modifications in the maximum numbers in the Reserve Naval and Marine Forces set out in Supplementary Votes A 2015-16, HC 716, be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1 and 3 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996. — (Mel Stride.)
ESTIMATES 2016-17 (ARMY) VOTE A
Resolved,
That, during the year ending with 31 March 2017, a number not exceeding 112,900 all ranks be maintained for Army Service and that numbers in the Reserve Land Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2016–17, HC 715.—(Mel Stride.)

ESTIMATES 2016-17 (AIR) VOTE A
Resolved,
That, during the year ending with 31 March 2017, a number not exceeding 35,500 all ranks be maintained for Air Force Service and that numbers in the Reserve Air Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2016–17, HC 715.—(Mel Stride.)

ESTIMATES, EXCESSES 2014-15
Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2015—
(1) resources, not exceeding £104,823,000, be authorised to make good excesses for use for current purposes as set out in Statement of Excesses 2014–15, HC 749,
(2) resources, not exceeding £406,000, be authorised to make good excesses for use for capital purposes as set out in Statement of Excesses 2014–15, HC 749, and
(3) a sum, not exceeding £275,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund to make good excesses on the use of resources authorised by Parliament as set out in Statement of Excesses 2014-15. —(Mel Stride.)

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2015-16
Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2016:
(1) further resources, not exceeding £143,043,583,000 be authorised for use for current purposes, as set out in HC 747 and HC 750,
(2) the resources authorised for use for capital purposes be reduced by £21,730,537,000 as so set out, and
(3) the sum authorised for issue out of the Consolidated Fund be reduced by £5,410,893,000 as so set out.—(Mel Stride.)

ESTIMATES, VOTE ON ACCOUNT 2016-17
Resolved,
That, for the year ending with 31 March 2017—
(1) resources, not exceeding £229,024,490,000 be authorised, on account, for use for current purposes as set out in HC 748, HC 751, HC 757, HC 762, HC 802 and HC 812,
(2) resources, not exceeding £29,298,192,000, be authorised, on account, for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
(3) a sum, not exceeding £222,965,394,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(Mel Stride.)

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;
That the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Greg Hands, Harriett Baldwin, Damian Hinds and Mr David Gauke bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL
Presentation and First Reading, and remaining stages
Mr David Gauke accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the years ending with 31 March 2015, 31 March 2016 and 31 March 2017; to authorise the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund for those years; and to appropriate the supply authorised by this Act for the years ending with 31 March 2015 and 31 March 2016.

Bill read the First time; to be printed (Bill 147).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 36 and Order 24 February), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.
Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.
Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 13 to 18 together.

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft National Assembly for Wales (Representation of the People) (Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 17 December 2015, be approved.

That the draft National Assembly for Wales (Representation of the People) (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 3 February, be approved.

POLICE

That the draft Police and Crime Commissioner Elections (Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 17 December 2015, be approved.

PATENTS

That the draft Patents (European Patent with Unitary Effect and Unified Patent Court) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 19 January, be approved.

HEALTH CARE AND ASSOCIATED PROFESSIONS

That the draft Pharmacy (Premises Standards, Information Obligations, etc.) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Electricity Supplier Payments (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 25 January, be approved.—(Mel Stride.)

Question agreed to.
Dog Theft: Sentencing

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

7.48 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate, and as a dog owner I was minded to do so for a couple of reasons—first, the inadequate sentencing guidelines for this type of offence, and, secondly, the sheer nastiness of this offence and the fact that it needs clamping down on far more than currently happens.

I do not criticise this or any previous Government, but it is necessary to appreciate the devastating impact that the theft of a dog has on its owner. That emotional impact overrides the financial loss, but too often our court systems are geared up to deal with such thefts simply as a form of property crime. The theft of a dog is a particularly nasty offence. Sometimes dogs are targeted because of their monetary value, but often it is done to allow grief-stricken owners to put up reward posters in the area, with those rewards then claimed by the actual perpetrator.

Before coming to this House I spent nearly 20 years working in the criminal justice system so I have some appreciation of the difficulties and complexities that the courts are labouring under. I am also aware that organisations such as the Sentencing Council endeavour to provide user-friendly, concise guidelines for a multitude of different situations, but I feel that it needs to reflect on its guidelines for offences of theft, as there is little to ensure that those who steal dogs get an appropriate sentence.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. There was a debate in Westminster Hall a few months ago, initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) on dog theft, cat killing and cruelty to pets and one point that arose then is that the law equates the loss of a pet to the loss of property, which is wrong. The law takes no account at all of the wider emotional impact of the theft, or of the societal needs for proper punishment in such cases.

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point, and he is right when he says that there is a failure to acknowledge the emotional impact of such thefts—that is one reason why I secured this debate. Because of the failure of the system, few statistics are kept, and stolen dogs are often deemed to have run away as there is little proof they have been stolen. There is also no separate category of the theft of a dog, and such thefts tend to be lumped together with all the other chattels that get stolen. It is believed by Blue Cross that roughly three dogs are stolen each day. Three cats are also stolen each day, and my hon. Friend was right to mention that because the same principles apply. Almost half those thefts are from people's gardens, one in five from burglaries, one in seven is from owners walking their dogs, and most of the other thefts take place when people leave their dogs tied up outside shops.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Dogs have been domesticated for millennia, they have been man's best friend for centuries, and today they remain an integral part of many families and are loved as much as any member. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that introducing a new category would reflect the fact that, although dogs are animals, for many people up and down this nation their dog is as much a part of the family as any other member?

Gareth Johnson: As is often the case, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out the failure of the current system. I argue that we can deal with that by amending the sentencing guidelines. It does not necessarily need a change in the law; it needs a change in the approach to sentencing, which is completely inadequate at the moment.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. To reinforce the point just made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), too often people are sentenced as if they have nicked a garden gnome, TV or video that can easily be replaced by buying another one. The theft of a dog is stealing part of the family, and the sentence should reflect the impact that that theft has, which goes far beyond the impact of stealing a TV.

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and this debate generates a fair amount of passion because of the pain that such thefts impose on people who go through the loss of a quasi-member of their own family.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend mentions how pets are stolen in burglaries. Perhaps the courts could consider an offence of aggravated burglary in relation to crimes involving pets.

Gareth Johnson: That is a very interesting point. There should certainly be an aggravating feature of the offence of theft. Unfortunately, that is not the case according to the Sentencing Council's guidelines. That is what is missing. Dogs are stolen in burglaries for a multitude of reasons: for fighting, for ransoms, for breeding or for selling on.

This crime is increasing and the emotional impact it has on both the owner and the dogs is immeasurable. Anyone who has had a dog stolen from them is able to say how painful an experience it is for both the owner and the animal, yet I fear penalties will now be reduced rather than increased. This is due to the flawed sentencing guidelines introduced just last month. Under the guidelines, theft sentencing is split into three categories—high, medium and lesser culpability. These are defined by specific characteristics. However, none of those characteristics includes anything that would normally apply for the theft of a dog. This forms the very starting point for sentencing. The guidelines then go on to look at the harm caused, which does cover emotional distress to the victim but is assessed primarily by the financial loss to the victim. That cannot be the right approach.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for coming late to the debate. I was caught out by the previous Division. The hon. Gentleman mentions the emotional impact of the theft of a dog. That is so important. For those of us who love dogs and have owned them all their lives, we know how terrible it is when we have to say goodbye to them. It is terrible to
lose a dog in circumstances where we do not know what has happened, whether stolen by a criminal gang to be used for fighting or whatever. Does he agree that the emotional impact should be reflected in sentences for people who steal dogs?

Gareth Johnson: I certainly do. I agree with everything the hon. Gentleman says. It is one of those offences where the emotional loss is not catered for in the guidelines. It does not just relate to dog theft and other animals but to personal items. The emotional impact of the theft of family photographs belonging to family members who have passed away is not properly taken into account when the courts are sentencing offenders either.

Courts cannot place dog thefts in the top half of offending categories unless the dog has a high monetary value, and that is not always the case. It means there is a greater chance of prison for the theft of a pedigree than there is for the theft of a mongrel. This approach completely fails to understand the nature of dog theft. The impact an offence like this has on a victim is not even mentioned in the list of aggravating factors that the court should take into account. Dog theft is now seen as an easy way of making money with little chance of a prison sentence imposed on the offender. In fact, under the current guidelines it is very difficult for a court to imprison someone for the theft of a dog that is worth less in monetary terms than £500. It is no wonder, then, that these offences are on the increase.

I fully accept that the Sentencing Council cannot cater for every type of theft and that it has an extremely difficult job, but there needs to be a greater appreciation of the emotional impact an offence can have on an individual.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I applaud my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I am a dog owner and have been a magistrate for some 10 years. I have never actually seen a dog theft in my years as a magistrate, which is to the good, but I can very much imagine the anguish it would cause. From memory, the sentencing band for a low level theft would be probably from a conditional discharge to a fine, and perhaps in extremis a low level community order. I am sure it would be far more beneficial for the victim impact statement to have a far greater bearing, and the ability to go to a small custodial sentence may be the way forward in such cases.

Gareth Johnson: I completely agree with everything my hon. Friend has said. I am not surprised that he has not seen one of these cases because of the difficulty of bringing them to court. The problem brings us back to the over-reliance on the monetary value of the item stolen. If I were to sell my scruffy mutt, I would be lucky to get a fiver for it, quite frankly—but that rather misses the point. I would sooner have my mobile phone or even my car stolen than my dog. It is not a chattel and should not be treated as such. A distinction should be made when it comes to sentencing.

I have seen posters in my local area and my constituency seeking lost dogs, and they often say something like “reward—no questions asked”. This problem is thus going on under the radar of the authorities, which is why we do not see as many cases going to court as we should. The deterrent factor that a prison sentence would offer is often missing, yet this is an offence that causes misery for thousands of people around our country.

The message to people who are thinking of buying a dog is that they should do so only from a reputable source. There are some excellent organisations helping to tackle this problem, such as Blue Cross, Dog Theft Action and Dog Lost, which commended much of the work carried out on this by my local Kent police force and a few other forces as well. Yet if the criminal justice system allows those who commit these offences to walk away with light penalties, this problem will only grow and grow.

8.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) on his habitual tenacity, which enabled him to secure this very important debate. The truth is that many people become very attached to their pets and treat them like family—sometimes better than family. I know at first hand that the distress caused when a pet disappears is heightened if it is suspected or found that the pet has been stolen for nefarious purposes of one sort or another. That can only aggravate the fear that the pet may come to some form of harm. As I say, I know this at first hand, because I grew up with dogs. I had a dog that I loved very dearly, so I know the worry when dogs go missing. In my case, the dog was a Rhodesian Ridgeback. Anyone who knows the breed will realise that it is unlikely to be stolen. None the less, we fretted every time he jumped the gate or the back garden. I know what the feeling is like.

Sadly, the truth is that we are seeing a growing trend of disappearances and thefts of pets, with all the distress that can cause to individual owners. We in government have to make sure that the criminal justice system is able to respond to these incidents, that we have the resources and expertise to investigate the cases, that there is the will to prosecute them, and that the courts—this is the key to my hon. Friend’s debate—have the necessary criminal and sentencing powers to ensure that we punish offenders and, let us not forget, deter offending.

I hold ministerial responsibility for sentencing, so I need to be assured that courts have the right framework and the right powers in place. I would like to talk a little about deterrence, if only because it is not necessarily always talked about, yet it is an important part of the matter, preventing offences from happening in the first place. I will return to that in a moment, if I may.

Let me say a few words about the available offences and the sentences connected with them. First, we have offences of animal cruelty and failure to meet an animal’s basic needs. These are set out in the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Those offences carry a maximum of six months imprisonment or a fine, or both. The courts also have the power to ban an offender from keeping animals in the future. It is not always the case that a stolen pet has been mistreated, but where it has been, this offence may apply.

Where the offence charged is theft, under the Theft Act 1968, the maximum penalty is seven years. That applies to domestic animals, just as it does to any other
many have a strong sense of empathy. Moreover, they hon. Friend's key points. Judges are human beings, and particular subjective value to the owner regardless of its victim, and the fact that the stolen item may be of in the guideline include emotional distress caused to the owner. Aggravating factors: the offender is acting as part of a group or gang, so that there is an organised crime element; there is significant planning of the offence; or the goods are stolen to order. Unfortunately, all those factors are often present when a dog has been stolen. The courts have adequate criminal powers, and I believe that they have adequate sentencing powers at their disposal, as well as recent and substantial guidance to help them to reach balanced, proportionate and consistent sentencing decisions, all the while taking account of all the facts of the case. It is precisely because we want them to take account of the individual impact in an individual case that we must allow judges to retain that measure of discretion.

Let me say a little about deterrence. The sentences passed by the courts are partly aimed at deterring other prospective offenders, but people can, of course, take action themselves to prevent their dogs from being stolen. Improvements in technology are one of the major reasons why we have managed to reduce the incidence of crime in recent years. Microchipping of dogs has been available for more than 25 years, and I am told that about 83% of dogs are now voluntarily chipped by their owners. My hon. Friend was, of course, one of the tenacious campaigners for the compulsory microchipping of dogs, and I congratulate him on his efforts. He, like me, will have been pleased to learn that the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is to introduce compulsory microchipping in England on 6 April this year. Similar arrangements will also be in place in Scotland and Wales.

This measure is to be welcomed because it is an important step for animal welfare more broadly. It will make it easier to identify dogs and reunite them with their owners. It will also make it easier to prove that a dog has been stolen, which is important for prosecutions, and I know that my hon. Friend wants to see more of those. Most importantly, however, it can act as a deterrent. A prospective criminal who knows that a dog is microchipped is significantly less likely to target that animal for theft. The fact that all dogs must now be microchipped is as important a factor in reducing these distressing offences as the effective and flexible sentencing response, which I believe is already available.

I congratulate my hon. Friend again on securing the debate. He has been tenacious in raising this important matter, and we will always keep these issues under review, but I believe that on balance we now have the right powers, criminal offences and sentencing discretion in place to deal with this very serious crime.

Question put and agreed to.
The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

**Broadband: Urban Areas**

1. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What recent progress has been made on improving access to broadband in urban areas. [903855]

Mr Vaizey: I am very pleased to tell you, Mr Speaker, that the broadband roll-out is going extremely well, particularly in our cities. I am also particularly pleased at the success of our business voucher scheme, under which 50,000 businesses have benefited.

Richard Graham: I make no apology for returning to the thorny issue of the frustrations of e-poverty in the city of Gloucester. In 2013, BT promised to upgrade box No. 90. In 2014, it said it was sorry for the delay, but that it would still happen. In 2015, it changed its mind. In 2016, at a meeting with me earlier this week, it asked, “Could you send us the original emails saying we would ever upgrade this box?” At what stage is a commitment from BT a real commitment that will not result in constituents turning around to me and saying, “You lied”?

Mr Vaizey: I am obviously not BT’s spokesman, but I hope BT is listening to what my hon. Friend has to say. He is a fantastic constituency MP. While I am very proud of the success of our roll-out programme, it is incumbent on BT to get its act together in terms of customer service and delivering on its promises.

Andrew Gwyne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): When the Minister boasts that we have some of the best broadband in Europe, who is he comparing us with? Is he aware of the House of Lords report showing that, for broadband speed, we are the 19th fastest in the world and the 12th fastest in Europe? Is that not really abysmal, and can we not do better?

Mr Vaizey: I do not think we could do better than we are already, actually. When I compare our broadband, I do so first with similar countries, such as Germany, France, Spain and Italy, all of whom we are beating. I would not look simply at speed. The hon. Gentleman takes a very narrow view, and does not look at prices. We have some of the lowest prices anywhere in the world. If we look at results—the fact that we lead the world in e-commerce, for example—they show that we are probably the world’s most advanced digital nation.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): In urban areas, such as Bath, technology is available to skip the roll-out of superfast broadband and go directly to the installation of ultrafast broadband. Does the Minister agree with the logic of that, which will help to reduce disruption and save money in the long term and give businesses in Bath a huge boost?

Mr Vaizey: It is very important to set realistic targets. That is why we dropped Labour’s pathetic 2 megabits policy and went to 24 megabits. Now is the time to start looking at a gigabit Britain. I utterly endorse what my hon. Friend says. Let us not get stuck in the past with Labour; let us go forward to the future.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Is the Minister aware that the very latest European Commission digital economy scorecard, published in just the past few weeks, ranks the UK below not just the Nordic countries, which we would expect, but countries such as Belgium?

Mr Vaizey: I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman’s tone of contempt for small countries such as Belgium. I think small countries—small and perfectly formed countries—are often extremely successful. Just the other day, I was talking to an investor about the extraordinary digital businesses that exist in Edinburgh, such as Skyscanner. Those really groundbreaking businesses are developing thanks to our digital policies. I know that he will support what we are doing. I have forgotten his original point, because I was going on so much about what a fantastic, digitally innovative country Scotland is.

Mr Vaizey: I am surprised—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The question is ongoing. People must not beetle out of the Chamber while their question is ongoing. That is a very established principle. I am sure the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) is interested in views other than his own.

Mr Vaizey: It may be that BT, having heard his question, is already on the phone to my hon. Friend. I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman’s tone of contempt for small countries such as Belgium. I think small countries—small and perfectly formed countries—are often extremely successful. Just the other day, I was talking to an investor about the extraordinary digital businesses that exist in Edinburgh, such as Skyscanner. Those really groundbreaking businesses are developing thanks to our digital policies. I know that he will support what we are doing. I have forgotten his original point, because I was going on so much about what a fantastic, digitally innovative country Scotland is.

Mr Speaker: I hope the Minister is right and that the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) will get that phone call before very long.

**Public Service Broadcasting**

2. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the economic and cultural benefits to the UK of public service broadcasting. [903856]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): Public service broadcasting is the powerhouse of the UK’s world-class television industry.
In 2014, public service broadcasters invested £2.5 billion in original TV content, and accounted for over half of all TV viewing.

Daniel Zeichner: I have had representations from hundreds of constituents in Cambridge who are concerned about the future of the BBC. They are overwhelmingly supportive and positive. We now have the results of the consultation and more than three-fifths of respondents were in favour of continuing with the current funding system. Will the Secretary of State give an assurance that there will be no further top-slicing of the licence fee?

Mr Whittingdale: I hope to be able to update the House on our progress on the renewal of the charter in due course. We are taking all the responses seriously and taking them fully into account. We have already agreed with the BBC that one of the top-slices of the licence fee—the additional amount that is taken for broadband—will come to an end in 2020.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend will have noted the BBC's forthcoming Shakespeare season, which is being held in collaboration with many other bodies, including the Royal Shakespeare Company. It is designed to bring Shakespeare to life for a new generation, using not just TV, but radio and online services. Does he agree that that is exactly the sort of thing the BBC ought to be doing, and something that only the BBC could do?

Mr Whittingdale: I agree with my right hon. Friend very strongly. This year is the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death. It is an enormously important event and the BBC has a crucial role to play. I had the pleasure about 10 days ago of watching the filming of Ben Elton's new comedy, "Upstart Crow", which is based on Shakespeare. As my right hon. Friend says, I suspect that that is the sort of thing that only the BBC would do.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State agree that the proposals of BBC Scotland to strengthen its news output by investing in jobs and production for an entirely editorially independent "Scottish Six" programme, anchored from Scotland, are a development that all of us across the House can welcome as an example of a long-term commitment to public service broadcasting? Will he just promise us that there will be no interference from Downing Street?

Mr Whittingdale: I had a very good meeting with Fiona Hyslop a couple of weeks ago to talk about the way in which the BBC meets the requirement to serve the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. I obviously welcome any investment at the BBC that will create additional jobs, particularly in Scotland, which I know the hon. Gentleman will value. How the BBC goes about meeting the obligation to serve the nations and regions is a matter for the BBC. Certainly, neither I nor my colleagues in No. 10 would want to instruct it on how to go about it.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Eighty per cent. of the 192,000 responses to the Green Paper consultation say that the BBC serves its audiences well or very well, and the majority believe its content to be both high quality and distinctive from that of other broadcasters. The Secretary of State purports to be a supporter of the BBC, so why is he using charter renewal to cut back and restrict what the BBC does, rather than help it to compete in the rapidly changing and increasingly global broadcasting environment?

Mr Whittingdale: I was not surprised to find that the responses showed that the vast majority of people value the BBC. As I have said, I value the BBC. The hon. Lady will have to await the publication of the White Paper, but it is not a question of trying to cut back the BBC's output. Nevertheless, there is a case, which is borne out by some of the responses and by other surveys we have conducted, for saying that the BBC needs to be more distinctive. That is something that the director-general himself said when he set out his plans for the charter renewal.

Maria Eagle: The Secretary of State's speech yesterday was rather more about bashing the BBC than anything else. That is what the chair of the BBC Trust said. Bashing the BBC is the one thing the Secretary of State agrees about with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor these days. They all want to use charter renewal to eviscerate the BBC and do its competitors a favour, rather than to deliver what the licence fee-paying public want. They just do not seem to accept that the British people like the BBC and want it to continue what it is doing. When will the Secretary of State accept that charter renewal should be about making the BBC fit for the future, rather than trying to diminish it for the commercial convenience of its competitors?

Mr Whittingdale: The hon. Lady must have looked at a different speech from the one I delivered. It certainly was not about bashing the BBC. Indeed, as soon as I finished making the speech, I had an extremely good meeting with the chairman of the BBC Trust, who did not mention anything about my bashing the BBC and welcomed what I had said.

The charter renewal is precisely about making the BBC fit for the future. I intend to bring forward the publication as soon as is possible, but, as the hon. Lady knows, there are a number of very important contributions, including the 192,000 consultations, that we want to take fully into account.

Satellite Broadband Voucher Scheme: Lancashire

3. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What assessment he has made of the level of uptake of the satellite broadband voucher scheme in Lancashire.

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): We are making great progress on superfast roll-out. We have reached almost 4 million premises, and it is going extremely well.

Andrew Stephenson: I welcome the Government's commitment to spreading faster broadband to rural areas, but my constituents have found it difficult to find information about the voucher scheme. Will my hon. Friend commit to working with Lancashire County Council and Broadband Delivery UK to ensure that households that could benefit from satellite broadband are made aware of that important scheme?
Mr Vaizey: In my original answer, I was obviously pointing out how well the satellite broadband scheme is going as well. We launched it at the end of December to ensure that people with speeds of less than 2 megabits per second can get the speeds they need. It was a soft launch, but we will make the scheme much more high profile in the next few months. I will happily work with my hon. Friend to make sure that his constituents can benefit from the scheme, although I note that superfast broadband roll-out will be almost 100% both in his constituency and in Lancashire.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): On the subject of uptake, nearby Merseyside authorities are not claiming the millions that BT set aside for non-commercial broadband areas. Will the Minister look into that and put some pressure on the councils?

Mr Vaizey: Yes, I will certainly look into it. It is important that councils lead our scheme, because they know what is happening on the ground. We will work with them so that they can access either funding from central Government or European funding.

Tourism: York

4. Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support tourism in York since the recent flooding in that area.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): York, along with other affected areas, is currently being promoted with a £1 million publicity campaign, which was announced by the Prime Minister on 28 January. It is designed to encourage British families to spend their Easter holidays in the north of England. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State also launched Virgin Trains 30% discount offer on 1 February, as part of his visit to York to promote the city and its wider region as open for business.

Julian Sturdy: I thank the Minister for his detailed response. About 200 businesses in York were flooded after Christmas, and thankfully many are now getting back on their feet. Building on what he said about the recent VisitEngland campaign to encourage families to visit northern tourist destinations such as York, will he consider providing individual grants so that local tourist attractions can market themselves and let everyone know that they are open for business again?

Mr Evennett: I know how assiduous my hon. Friend is in his commitment to the area. I am really pleased that York is open for business following the recent floods and welcoming visitors back. Tourism businesses in flood-affected areas that were directly or indirectly impacted are eligible for the £5 million recovery fund from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and businesses can use those grants to help promote themselves. VisitBritain and VisitEngland are in dialogue with specific flood-affected businesses to spread the message about the areas that are open for business and ready to receive visitors.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is 1,000 years since King Canute’s accession to the throne. “Campaign Canute” is trying to raise £2 million so that Jorvik Viking Centre can reopen before 2017. What additional support can the Minister bring to that major tourist attraction in York?

Mr Evennett: The Government’s first priority, of course, has been to deal with the physical impact of the floods themselves in the short term, and we have worked hard to make that happen. We now need to make sure that businesses that were affected attract the bookings that they need over the next few months. I have been to the Jorvik Viking Centre myself in the past and was very impressed with it, and I look forward to going again in the future. VisitEngland and VisitBritain are in discussions with such businesses and are using all their channels to support affected areas.

Nuisance Calls

5. Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the number of nuisance calls.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): The Government are taking a range of measures to tackle nuisance calls, including strengthening the regulators’ ability to take enforcement action against organisations that break the law and increasing consumer choice by consulting on making it a requirement for direct marketing callers to display their calling line identification.

Sir Simon Burns: Many of my constituents will be very pleased by that answer, but does the Secretary of State accept that they will hope that the action will be taken quickly? Like me, they are fed up to the back teeth with sleazy calls trying to sell them PPI protection or help with personal injuries that never happened. It is time that something was done to stop those disreputable practices.

Mr Whittingdale: My right hon. Friend and I are constituency neighbours, so I am very much aware of our constituents’ concerns about this subject. I am sure that neither he nor I would ever be guilty of making nuisance calls, either in relation to our own elections or, indeed, on behalf of candidates in other elections across the pond. However, action is being taken. The new measures are taking effect and in just the last week, the Information Commissioner’s Office announced a record fine of £350,000 against one of the leading firms responsible for nuisance calls.

Mr Speaker: We are all better informed.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Nuisance calls are increasingly annoying to me and many of my constituents—the problem may affect people in Scotland more adversely, with nine out of 10 residents claiming to have had them in any given month—and 30 March will mark the second anniversary of the DCMS report, “Nuisance Calls Action Plan”. What plans does the Secretary of State have to publish a revised plan, detailing what success the first plan has had and what future action can be taken to tackle the problem?
Mr Whittingdale: We keep the matter under continual review, but we have taken a number of measures, and we will shortly come forward with the outcome of our consultation on strengthening the requirements for direct marketing callers. I am also in contact with organisations such as Which? that have a good record on the matter. If further measures need to be taken, we will certainly do that.

**Superfast Broadband**

6. Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): What progress has been made on the roll-out of superfast broadband.

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): The roll-out of superfast broadband is going very well and we have reached almost 4 million premises.

Paula Sherriff: Areas in my constituency fall into the so-called “broadband white areas”, where internet access is virtually non-existent. In 2010, the Government committed to providing every home with a basic broadband connection by the end of 2015. Three months on from that date, I have been contacted by many constituents who are still without a decent broadband service to their homes or businesses. Will the Secretary of State look into that and deliver on the commitment that was made five years ago to give every household and business access to broadband, which, in 2016, is surely a necessity, not a luxury?

Mr Vaizey: I am very pleased to tell the hon. Lady that about 96% of premises in her constituency will get superfast broadband, but also, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), the satellite voucher scheme is now available and all the hon. Lady’s constituents who do not have broadband or have broadband under 2 megabits can apply and have satellite installed for free.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Those of my constituents who have missed out on the roll-out of superfast broadband are now pinning their hopes on the universal service obligation, which the Prime Minister announced before Christmas. How far has the Minister got with the consultations that I understand have to be conducted before the USO can be introduced?

Mr Vaizey: I am very pleased to tell my hon. Friend that we are proceeding at pace with our consultation, the results of which we will issue shortly, and we will probably legislate to introduce the universal service obligation in the digital economy Bill. I am delighted that he will get 99% superfast broadband in his constituency anyway.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have several cases of superfast broadband not reaching certain constituents, particularly businessmen. In the light of that, what discussions has the Minister had with broadband companies about improving copper cables, thus enabling them to reach further, and connection boxes so that superfast broadband is available to more people?

Mr Vaizey: We constantly challenge the communication providers to provide new technology and I am pleased that Virgin is extending its roll-out and that BT is introducing G.fast. I am also pleased that superfast broadband will approach around 85% in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

**Fixed Odds Betting Terminals**

7. Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): What recent representations he has received on fixed odds betting terminals.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): Details of all the meetings that I and other Ministers have had with interested parties on this matter are available via the Department’s transparency returns. In addition, my officials engage regularly with all interested stakeholders to discuss gambling policy more generally, including the issue of fixed odds betting terminals.

Margaret Greenwood: In 2014-15, people in Wirral lost more than £2 million at fixed odds betting terminals, and more than £290,000 of that was lost in my constituency of Wirral West. Low pay and insecure work is such a feature of our economy that people cannot afford to lose large sums of money. Will the Government realise the seriousness of the risk that FOBTs pose to people on lower incomes and substantially cut the maximum stake?

Mr Whittingdale: I understand the concern about fixed odds betting terminals, and we keep the issue under review. The hon. Lady may be aware that last year we brought in new requirements that improved player protection, in particular by putting a stop to unsupervised play for stakes of over £50. It is already clear that that has had an impact on player behaviour. As far as we can see, the rate of problem gambling remains at under 1% and has not shown any sign of rising as a result of FOBTs.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, the inconvenient truth is that problem gambling rates have reduced since the introduction of fixed odds betting terminals. The Campaign for Fairer Gambling claimed that each fixed odds betting terminal makes a profit of £1,000 a week. As a betting shop is open for more than 90 hours a week, that works out at an average profit of around £11 an hour. Does the Secretary of State think that that is an excessive profit rate? If he does, what does he think an acceptable profit rate would be?

Mr Whittingdale: An awful lot of claims and counter-claims are made in this area, and not all of them stand up to close scrutiny. The Government intend to maintain a close watch over the issue, and any further changes that we introduce will be firmly evidence-based.

**Online Crime**

8. Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): What discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on ensuring that social media companies comply with police investigations into online crime.
The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): I have regular meetings with ministerial colleagues at the Home Office to discuss a range of issues.

Simon Danczuk: Companies such as Facebook often talk about corporate social responsibility, and I can think of nothing more responsible than co-operating with the police about death threats. Greater Manchester police have been waiting weeks for Facebook to help to identify those who made such threats to some Members of this House, not least me. Does the Secretary of State agree that Facebook and other social media need to do more to help the criminal justice system?

Mr Whittingdale: I expect all social media companies to assist the police and uphold the law. Those providing communication services to users in the UK have an obligation to comply with UK warrants that request the content of communications, and with notices requiring the disclosure of data. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should bring that to the attention of Facebook, and indeed to Greater Manchester police, if such co-operation is not forthcoming.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Will the Minister join me in roundly welcoming the consultation that is starting today on taking action against cowardly internet trolls who create fake social media profiles and bully, harass and menace others online, and on taking action to help children affected by online bullying?

Mr Whittingdale: I entirely share my hon. Friend’s concern, and it is very distressing when such things happen. I discovered that someone had set up a profile of me without my knowledge a few weeks ago, and I swiftly had it removed. It is clear that we must tighten the law where people are using such profiles to cause distress. In some cases they are breaching the law, so I welcome the new guidelines from the CPS.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Internet companies are required to respond to requests from the police, but there is no timescale for that. It takes more than three weeks on average before Twitter provides data to the UK police for criminal investigations. What will the Minister and the Government do to force internet companies to respond promptly and immediately to our law enforcement agencies that are pursuing criminals?

Mr Whittingdale: As I said to the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk), I expect all social media companies to comply with the law without any unnecessary delay. If there is evidence that they are delaying, I am happy to discuss the matter with my colleagues in the Home Office and to consider what more can be done.

EU Digital Single Market

9. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What steps he is taking to bring about the completion of the EU digital single market with regard to telecoms, audio visual policy, IT security and data protection.

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): This Government are a great champion of the digital single market, and I know that all colleagues will have read the Prime Minister’s excellent White Paper. It means, for example, that people will no longer pay roaming charges when travelling across the EU, and once the digital single market is in place, we will see a huge increase in our GDP.

Nic Dakin: According to the No. 10 website, we could create £325 billion of additional growth by fostering a digital single market, and it points to the advantages of that for consumers. Given that, why would anybody campaign to leave the EU rather than energetically work to get the best deal for the UK?

Mr Vaizey: Why indeed would anyone want to leave the EU? We present a united front in this House on the benefits of EU membership.

Mr Speaker: Yes. [Laughter.]

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The Minister will be aware that, at 12.4% of GDP, the UK’s internet economy is by far the largest of all the G20; it is double that of the US, more than twice the size of Germany’s and about four times the size of France’s. Does the Minister agree that getting a good deal on the digital single market is particularly important for the UK, because so many jobs and so much of the economy depend on it?

Mr Vaizey: I agree with my hon. Friend. He points out the share of the internet economy, and it is incumbent on the Opposition to explain why they come to this House all the time to rubbish our digital record and pretend there is no broadband in the UK. How has the digital economy come about if people are not using the brilliant superfast broadband we are delivering?

Tourism: Northamptonshire

10. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support tourism in Northamptonshire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): Our five-point plan for tourism makes clear the Government’s support for the tourism industry. That includes a commitment to encourage tourists to explore the country beyond London. I am delighted that we have secured the £40 million Discover England fund. That competitive fund will encourage public and private sector partners across the country to come together and improve our English tourism offer.

Tom Pursglove: I thank the Minister for that answer, but what help is being provided to owners of historic homes, such as Rockingham Castle in my constituency, not only to conserve that important historic home and those around the country but to boost local tourism?

Mr Evennett: My hon. Friend is well known as a real champion for his constituency and for Northamptonshire, and I commend him for that. I recognise the importance of privately owned heritage such as Rockingham Castle in supporting tourism. I am pleased to say that historic houses can apply for Heritage Lottery funding of up to £100,000 on projects that are a public benefit. Sites on
Historic England’s heritage at risk register can apply for funding from Historic England. [Interruption.] It is very important for the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) to know the facts.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, before you reprimand me, may I remind the House that John Clare was a Northamptonshire peasant poet? The John Clare Trust has opened his wonderful cottage to visitors and tourists, and the Minister would be welcome to pay an official visit at any time. Will he also tell the world that the trust supports the Every Child’s Right to the Countryside campaign to get kids out into the country and learning?

Mr Evennett: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. I endorse his comments and I look forward to visiting the area.

Mr Evennett: I commend my hon. Friend’s hard work in ensuring there were visitors to the birthplace of rugby during the Rugby world cup. I am interested in his proposition. I look forward to seeing what progress can be made and to visiting his area.

Northern Powerhouse: Arts Funding

11. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve competition among internet service providers.

Mr Vaizey: We have announced a joint review with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills regarding the potential benefits of encouraging alternative investment and competition in the UK’s telecommunications infrastructure?

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Andrew Rosindell: Will the Minister tell the House what discussions he has had with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills regarding the potential benefits of encouraging alternative investment and competition in the UK’s telecommunications infrastructure?

Mr Vaizey: I have been closely involved with the Science Museum on the future of the National Media Museum to London. What assessment has he made of the impact of such a move on cultural provision within Bradford, the wider Yorkshire region and, indeed, the northern powerhouse?

Mr Vaizey: I have been closely involved with the Science Museum on the future of the National Media Museum to London. What assessment has he made of the impact of such a move on cultural provision within Bradford, the wider Yorkshire region and, indeed, the northern powerhouse?

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): In areas where there is insufficient competition, tough regulation is required to ensure that existing providers are providing a fair service. In parts of rural Cheshire, there is no competition and insufficient regulation because Ofcom allows providers to charge a premium to rural customers because they live in rural areas. Where there is insufficient competition, will the Minister speak to Ofcom to provide that tough regulation and a fair deal for rural broadband customers?

Mr Vaizey: Yes. I met the chief executive of Ofcom yesterday, and I told her that we were four square behind digital communications review, which includes, as I say, tough measures on BT—we want BT to reach agreement on that by the end of the year—and pro-consumer mechanisms such as automatic compensation, which we also strongly support.

Chi Ouwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister shows great artistry in the picture he paints, but we know that the regions were already losing
out on arts funding by a ratio of 14:1 before the Chancellor chose to chop billions from northern local authorities struggling to maintain arts for all. The Sutton report last week said that the arts are becoming less and less accessible. Does the Minister agree that the arts are far too important to our culture and our identity to be left in the hands of a privileged few?

Mr Vaizey: I would certainly agree with the hon. Lady on that. Our forthcoming White Paper will announce new measures to increase access to the arts, but we have already supported, for example, music education hubs, extended the In Harmony scheme and introduced new schemes for the arts in schools, so I take great issue with her implicit criticism that we are not doing anything to increase access to the arts.

Historical Sex Abuse: Broadcasting Sector

13. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will make an assessment of whether further steps need to be taken to investigate allegations of historical sex abuse in the public service broadcasting sector. [903868]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): The report published by Dame Janet Smith last week was the result of a comprehensive and wide-ranging review. This is clearly a matter for the BBC, which commissioned the review and is responsible for responding, but I know that the chair and director-general take these issues extremely seriously, and I have already had a discussion with the director-general about them.

Mr Hollobone: This four-year, £6 million inquiry confirmed that Jimmy Savile molested 72 victims, that he raped a youngster as young as eight and that attacks occurred in the corridors and dressing-rooms of every BBC premises over a period of 47 years, yet no senior manager, past or present, has accepted individual responsibility for failing to stop him. Does the Secretary of State believe that this is an adequate response from Britain’s leading public service broadcaster?

Mr Whittingdale: I hope that my hon. Friend will read in full the statement by the director-general, which makes it clear that the BBC takes this matter very seriously. It has offered a full apology and fully accepts the recommendations of Dame Janet Smith. The important thing is that measures are put in place to ensure that this kind of thing can never happen again. A lot has been done already by the BBC, but I welcome the fact that the BBC has also accepted the recommendation that a further review be carried out to ensure that everything possible is being done to stop this kind of abuse ever happening again.

Topical Questions

T1. [903875] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr John Whittingdale): As you will know, Mr Speaker, today is World Book Day.

Since our last question time, my Department has published a summary of the responses to our consultation on the BBC charter review, Sir David Clementi’s report on the governance and regulation of the BBC, and the results of independent research on the BBC’s market impact. All those publications will inform our thinking.

The House will be delighted to hear that the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), has had a baby since the House last met. I am sure that Members will join me in congratulating her, and in wishing her and the new arrival well.

I know that the House will also join me in congratulating the British winners of last weekend’s Oscars, and in wishing our Davis Cup and track cycling teams well this weekend.

Chris Green: The British horseracing industry has an economic impact of £3.5 billion a year, and the Aintree and Haydock racecourses are very popular with my constituents. Will my right hon. Friend tell us when he plans to require offshore bookmakers to make a financial contribution to racing, as those based in Britain already do?

Mr Whittingdale: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the importance of horseracing to this country. I can tell him that we intend to introduce a new funding arrangement for British racing by April 2017. We will create a level playing field for British-based and offshore gambling operators, and will ensure a fair return for racing from all bookmakers, including those based offshore. The racing industry will be responsible for making decisions on the spending of the new fund. We will make further announcements shortly.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Four out of five tourism companies surveyed by UKinbound believe that staying in the European Union is important to their business. UKinbound’s chief executive officer, Deirdre Wells, has said:

“Saying ‘yes’ to staying in the EU sends a clear message that we are open for business.”

Why is the Secretary of State so intent on damaging our tourism industry by campaigning for Britain to leave the European Union, against the policy of his own Government?

Mr Whittingdale: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that, whatever the decision on Britain’s future membership of the European Union, this country will remain open to tourists, not just from the European Union but from across the world. We are already enjoying a steady increase in the number of international visitors, and I expect that to continue.

Suella Fernandes ( Fareham) (Con): Fort Fareham is on Historic England’s heritage at risk register; it is listed as priority A. Built in 1861, it forms part of the region's distinctive naval and coastal history. What support can the Minister give such heritage assets, which are at risk of rapid deterioration, particularly those in private ownership?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): I am well aware of Fort Fareham, which is one of several sites that testify to the important role of Portsmouth in the defence of our nation in the past. The purpose of the at
risk register is to enable Historic England and other partners to target their advice and support at the sites that are in greatest need. I am pleased to say that Historic England is working with its partners in south Hampshire to make the most of the fantastic history of Portsmouth harbour.

T3. [903878] Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I am sure that the Secretary of State was as aggrieved as I was to learn that late last year the Royal Society of Arts ranked South Tyneside as one of the lowest boroughs in the country on its heritage index. He should know as well as I do that South Tyneside has a huge amount of history and culture to offer. Would he consider accepting an invitation to come to the borough, with members of the RSA? He could take part in our summer festival, explore our ancient Roman sites, or perhaps pull a rabbit out of a hat during the upcoming annual magic show at our brilliant arts venue, the Customs House.

Mr Whittingdale: That is an almost irresistible offer, given the attractions of South Tyneside. The magic show sounds highly enticing.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to stress the importance of heritage to South Tyneside and, indeed, to the whole country. I hope that I shall manage to accept her invitation in due course, but I know that, in the meantime, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend Mr Edward Vaizey, is being assiduous in trying to visit as many tourism and heritage destinations as possible.

T5. [903880] David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that all Government Departments get behind the Government’s excellent new sports strategy, particularly in relation to outdoor recreation, with its benefits for physical health and for the tourism economy in rural areas in Macclesfield and far beyond?

Mr Evennett: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the value of outdoor recreation and sport. We recognise this and we are committed to working across the Government Departments to ensure that the new Sporting Future strategy promotes opportunities for everyone to get involved in outdoor activities, no matter where they are. Indeed, Sport England already invests millions of pounds in activities as diverse as trail running, canoeing and mountaineering, which provide exciting opportunities. We will continue to work with other Departments to make sure that this happens.

T4. [903879] Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Across the regions of the UK, there are some 4,500 miles of road with no mobile phone signals, according to a recent RAC report. That includes 452 miles in the highlands without 4G, 3G or 2G, which means that no texts or calls can be made there. Will the Minister commit to taking action to plug these specific gaps in mobile coverage?

The Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy (Mr Edward Vaizey): I am pleased to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that the emergency services network proposals will see 300 new mobile masts built, and our mobile infrastructure programme will see 75 miles covered. Our changes to the licences of mobile providers will require 90% geographical coverage, which will also result in improvements in mobile coverage.

T6. [903881] Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Sports Minister pro tem will have seen yesterday’s suggestion from distinguished luminaries in the medical world—including from places such as the University of the Pacific, wherever that might be—that we ban any form of tackling in rugby in schools. Does he agree that it is time to stop this mollycoddling of young people, and, while doing all we can to ensure that sport is safe, to let schools get on with teaching contact sports and the values that they represent?

Mr Evennett: My hon. and learned Friend will be well aware that the Government are committed to ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to get involved in sport from a young age, provided that it is made available within a safe environment. The Department for Education is responsible for sport in schools. Rugby and many other sports always carry an element of risk, and we expect those supervising sport at that level to ensure the safety of all participants. He will be interested to note that as part of our strategy on sport and physical activity, a full review of the duty of care in sport is to be carried out, chaired by Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson.

T7. [903882] Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): Local authority budgets are now under extreme pressure, and the Treasury is urging councils to liquidate all extraneous assets. Will the Secretary of State confirm from the Dispatch Box that that should not include the antiques, paintings and artefacts in local authority museums and galleries? None of us wants to see a fire sale of our national heritage on the back of this Government’s stumbling economic policy.

Mr Vaizey: One treasure that I hope will not be liquidated is the hon. Gentleman. I hope he will not be liquidated by the Momentum campaign in Stoke and that he will be reselected. We are all praying for him on this side of the House. In answer to his question, it is obviously up to individual local authorities, but they must adhere to the code of ethics of the Museums Association. I take a very dim view of local authorities getting rid of their heritage assets, particularly those that have been left to them by prominent members of the community.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): There have been numerous resignations from the board of London 2017. Has the Secretary of State had the chance to discuss the reasons for that with London 2017, and does he have any concerns about its working relationship with UK Athletics?

Mr Whittingdale: This is a matter that we keep under review, but I have not had a chance to discuss it recently. I will certainly look into it further and discuss it with the appropriate authorities.

T8. [903883] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): To prevent our pop charts from being disproportionately dominated by acts from private schools, and to prevent another all-white Brit awards like the...
event that was criticised last week, would the Minister consider starting a scheme similar to the much missed music action zones that the Labour Government created to encourage creativity and talent in music in non-classroom contexts?

Mr Whittingdale: This country produces some of the finest music acts in the world. A lot of the ones that I go to see certainly did not go to public school, and I am looking forward to going to see Muse and, I hope, Rainbow in the coming months. Of course, I want to see opportunity for everybody who has talent to succeed.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Victoria Pendleton, the Olympic champion, on riding her first winner over fences at Wincanton yesterday, on Pacha Du Polder, a horse owned by Andy Stewart and trained by Paul Nicholls? Her exploits are a big boost for the racing industry. Will the Secretary of State confirm that when he sets the rate of the new levy, he will be taking into account all the current streams of funding that go into racing from bookmakers, such as picture rights?

Mr Whittingdale: I of course join my hon. Friend in congratulating Victoria Pendleton. I heard her talking about her success this morning, and it shows how somebody can achieve great accomplishment in one sport and then go on to succeed in a second. On the specific point he raises about the extension of the levy to cover offshore, the amount will be determined by an analysis, which we have commissioned, of the funding and costs of racing. That will take account of all sources of revenue, including media rights, as he points out.

T9. [903884] Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell the House why his Government have gone from promising victims of press abuse that part 2 of Leveson will happen to saying that it “may” happen? Will he also tell the House how many meetings he and his Cabinet colleagues have had with newspaper proprietors over the past year and whether that was a topic of conversation?

Mr Whittingdale: We have always said that any decisions about whether or not Leveson 2 should take place will be taken once all the criminal proceedings have been completed. We are not at that stage; further criminal proceedings are under way. Once those are completed, we will come back to look at this question. We regularly publish a record of all meetings with newspaper proprietors, with victims of press intrusion and with ministerial colleagues. Of course, I have regular meetings with all of those, and I am looking forward to having a further meeting with Hacked Off to discuss these matters in a few weeks’ time.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—
Public Engagement in Parliament

1. Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): What steps he is taking to engage and involve more members of the public in the day-to-day business of Parliament.

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Therèse Coffey): The Government are committed to promoting public awareness of Parliament. Much has been achieved in this area in recent years, and this important work must continue. The Government particularly welcome the new e-petitions site, which has increased public engagement with Parliament since it was set up in July. The site collected 7 million signatures in its first six months, and to date 135 petitions have received a Government response and 19 petitions have been debated in Westminster Hall.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Lady for her response. One way in which we can ensure that more people engage in politics is by reaching them at a young age, and I therefore welcome the increase in school visits to this place under your speakership, Mr Speaker. What assessment has the Deputy Leader of the House made of the effectiveness of schools visiting Parliament and of the education centre in getting young people interested and involved in politics? In addition, has she given staff their bonuses for now having to try to explain the Government’s incomprehensible English votes for English laws process?

Dr Coffey: I visited the education centre for the first time earlier this week to speak to children from Sandlings primary school in my constituency. It is a really impressive facility and I am sure that Mr Speaker is rightly proud of it. The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point about our effectiveness at getting children from around the United Kingdom to come here, and as a constituency MP I have written to the Administration Committee to ask it to look at the effectiveness of that programme.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Further to the excellent point made by the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), will the Deputy Leader of the House join me in welcoming the news that 224 students from seven Pendle primary schools will be visiting Parliament in the next three months? Will she also join me in reminding teachers from across constituencies such as mine, which are more than 200 miles from London, that a travel subsidy is available for school trips to this place?

Dr Coffey: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the fact that he has got so many children engaged in this. Of course, the subsidy regime varies, but this is also about initiatives such as the Speaker’s school council awards. I have written to every school in my constituency encouraging them to enter it, and I think the closing date is in April.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the Government look at the level of school subsidies? I looked at it in relation to people from my school coming down, and found that they are only allowed to claim the subsidy if they are coming to the House of Commons as the main part of their business. If they are going to be doing other things in London, they cannot claim the subsidy. There are too many rules for the scheme to work for people in my constituency.

Dr Coffey: The rules on the school subsidy are not a matter for the Government, but there are members of the Commission in the House. The Administration Committee is probably the best avenue for taking this matter forward.
Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does the Deputy Leader of the House agree that the use of the internet, particularly developments such as parlamentlive.tv, has the potential to increase hugely the engagement of the public in proceedings of this place?

Dr Coffey: The internet is a marvellous form of communication—whether we are talking about social media or parlamentlive.tv. People can also watch us on the BBC Parliament channel if they so desire, and I am sure my mother is watching right now.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It will be of great concern to everybody in the House that more and more people think that Westminster politics is remote, corrupt, boring—inexplicably—and unclear. A third of eligible voters in Britain chose not to go down the road and cast a ballot in last year's general election. What does the Deputy Leader of the House believe are the main problems with Parliament that put people off, and what are the Government doing about it?

Dr Coffey: Voter engagement in terms of general election turnout collapsed in the 2001 election, after four years of a Blair Government. I am pleased to say that voter turnout has increased. The hon. Lady talks about this institution potentially being corrupt. That is not the case, as we have high levels of integrity, but where MPs have been found to break the law, they have been sent to jail and that is where they belong.

Barnett Consequentials

2. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What parliamentary mechanisms are available to hon. Members to scrutinise Barnett consequentials within the estimates process. [R] [903886]

7. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What parliamentary mechanisms are available to hon. Members to scrutinise Barnett consequentials within the estimates process. [903892]

8. Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): What parliamentary mechanisms are available to hon. Members to scrutinise Barnett consequentials within the estimates process. [903893]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Estimates are formal requests for authorisation of expenditure proposed to the House by the Government. Scrutiny of these, which are effectively departmental budgets, is undertaken in a variety of ways, including debates selected by the Liaison Committee, and it is also open to Select Committees to examine these budgets. The Procedure Committee has recently announced that it will look at the House’s procedures for examining estimates and the passing of legislation that authorises this expenditure—the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, which we dealt with yesterday.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for her answer. May we have a commitment today that steps will be taken to modify the estimates process so that Members representing Scottish constituencies can properly scrutinise the impact of legislation on Scotland?

Dr Coffey: I think the hon. Lady is on the Procedure Committee. Is that right? [Interruption.] I think she is. She will be aware of the inquiry that is happening right now. I believe that the Committee is accepting written submissions till 25 March. I really want to emphasise this point: when I served on a Select Committee, we certainly dedicated time to scrutinising budgets. I encourage all Select Committees to do likewise.

Dr Whitford: Yesterday, this House approved a budget spend of more than £600 billion without any real debate or breakdown of the Barnett consequentials. As fewer than half the Secretaries of State have taken oral questions since the estimates were published, how are Scottish MPs—or indeed any MPs—meant to hold the Government to account?

Dr Coffey: I believe that there are avenues to do that. I welcome this inquiry by the Procedure Committee, especially as it might open up some new ideas, and I hope that all political parties will contribute to it. I really encourage this idea that Select Committees are one avenue. Of course Ministers are always held to account at this Dispatch Box, and by written questions as well.

Steven Paterson: The hon. Lady keeps telling us that the Procedure Committee is reviewing the estimates process. Will she tell us whether, when giving evidence to that Committee, she or the Leader of the House will be supportive of reform of the estimates process?

Dr Coffey: I am not sure whether the Procedure Committee has invited me or my right hon. Friend to give evidence, but I am sure that it will. Our Government have always been in favour of modernisation of the House, and there is no reason why that journey will not continue.

Back-bench Business Debates

3. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will make it his policy to protect the time available for Back-Bench business debates on the Floor of the House. [903887]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): It is for the Backbench Business Committee to schedule the business for the days allocated to it in each Session, and for the Chair to manage the debates when they take place.

Mr Hollobone: This afternoon or perhaps late this morning there will be a debate on gangs and serious youth violence, which is an extremely important topic. The Leader of the House will know that this debate was scheduled for an earlier day, but because of urgent questions, statements and other business overrunning for legitimate reasons, there was no time left for that important debate to take place. That situation could have been avoided had the Leader of the House allocated that debate protected time. Using that experience, will he look to protect Back-Bench business on future heavy business days?

Chris Grayling: As I have said to the Chair of the Committee in recent weeks, I keep that under careful review. It is certainly the case that the gangs debate
moved to today because of a number of other parliamentary events that took place on the original day. However, the Backbench Business Committee has been able to bring the debate back to the House shortly afterwards, and as there are no urgent questions or statements today, there should be a full day available for today’s important debates. I will keep the matter under review, but I will need to be persuaded that things are going badly wrong before we could countenance a change to the way things work at present.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Leader of the House will agree with me that it is not just Back-Bench business and debates that are affected, but the rights and privileges of Back Benchers. Is he aware that very often the Opposition get squeezed by Front Benchers, with all their privileges, acting as Back Benchers as well, so it is much more competitive for us? Will he also bear in mind the fact that after my point of order to the Speaker, we had better behaviour from the Leader of the House and his Front-Bench colleagues at business questions, but after one week they have reverted to type?

**Chris Grayling:** Surely the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that Members on his Front Bench, particularly on this occasion, go on for much too long? That view might not command agreement on the Opposition Benches, but it certainly does on the Government Benches.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend consider the fact that when Back-Bench business debates are scheduled in this House, Members on all sides take the opportunity to come along to participate? We on the Backbench Business Committee try to arrange for 15 speakers, and if the debate gets squeezed and pushed to another day, that is very unacceptable to Back Benchers who have made the time to speak on important subjects?

**Chris Grayling:** Of course, that is an important point. That is why I say we will keep the matter under review. This is the first occasion that it has happened in recent times. Clearly, if it becomes a regular feature, we may have to think again, but I do not want to manage processes unnecessarily. We need to see whether there is genuinely a longer-term issue.

**Short Money**

4. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): When the Government plans to make a decision on future levels of Short money.

5. **Margaret Ferrier:** Government consultation is ongoing, but there is clearly a pressing need to know what resources will be available in a few weeks’ time. Can the Deputy Leader of the House assure us that no changes to the Short money allocation formula will take effect until the beginning of the 2017-18 financial year at the earliest?

**Dr Coffey:** The Government have not yet reached any conclusions, but my understanding is that that is part of the ongoing discussion between the parties.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): When making decisions about Short money, will Ministers ensure that appropriate arrangements are put in place for transparency about how those moneys are spent?

**Dr Coffey:** I welcome that contribution from my hon. Friend. That is indeed part of the proposal in our call for views, and I am sure he can write in to that formally to add weight to that argument.

**English Votes for English Laws**

5. **Tristram Hunt** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the introduction of procedures on English votes for English laws.

**The Leader of the House of Commons** (Chris Grayling): We have fulfilled our manifesto commitment to introduce English votes for English laws, which I believe will strengthen the Union. We have undertaken two Legislative Grand Committees, and several statutory instruments have been passed without Division. There have been some technical issues, but they relate also to the introduction of electronic counting in this House using iPads, which is routine in the other place now and which the House authorities are working on. Clearly, we would not wish to be left behind by the other House in the technologies that it uses. We will undertake a review of English votes for English laws procedures later this year.

**Tristram Hunt:** Does the Leader of the House not agree that the current Gilbert and Sullivan system for EVEL is simply unsustainable? It is confusing, haphazard and totally incomprehensible to the public. Will he therefore join my call for a referendum on an English Parliament so that the voice of England has clarity in our representative democracy? After all, we know how much he enjoys a referendum.

**Chris Grayling:** I am not necessarily certain that that is the Labour party’s policy. It is an interesting concept, but the Government were elected on a manifesto to deliver English votes for English laws in this place. It is set out in detail how we will do that, and we have implemented our commitment, as the electorate would have expected.

**Mr Speaker:** Very briefly, and on this question, I call Ian Lucas.

6. **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you will be aware that Coleg Cambria in my constituency has students resident in England who are directly affected by issues you have certified under the EVEL procedure as relating only to England. Will the
Leader of the House urgently consider this issue, which is directly affecting the livelihoods of people in my constituency? He is limiting my voice on these matters.

Chris Grayling: I have to admire the hon. Gentleman for his persistence in this matter, but as I have explained to him time and again, he has no say over matters such as health and education in his own constituency. It is not obviously logical that we should make special arrangements for him to have that say across the border in constituencies represented by other Members of this House.

Mr Speaker: Finally, and also briefly, I call Mr Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): There has barely been a more disastrous and divisive innovation than English votes for English laws. It is totally unnecessary, and the Tory majority in England and the UK is crushing any hope of a Tory revival in Scotland with this anti-Scottish tone. Is not EVEL now ripe for abolition, and should it not be confined to the dustbin of history?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman speaks with his customary reserve and understatement. I have to say that I totally disagree with him.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must move on.
10.37 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Chris Grayling): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 7 MARCH—Second Reading of the Policing and Crime Bill.

TUESDAY 8 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Enterprise Bill /Lords/ (day 1), followed by a debate on International Women’s Day, a subject determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 9 MARCH—Conclusion of the remaining stages of the Enterprise Bill /Lords/ (day 2), followed by, if necessary, consideration of further Lords amendments.

THURSDAY 10 MARCH—Consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Bill, followed by a debate on a motion on record copies of Acts. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 11 MARCH—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 14 March will include:

MONDAY 14 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Energy Bill /Lords/.

TUESDAY 15 MARCH—Second Reading of the Investigatory Powers Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments.

WEDNESDAY 16 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.

THURSDAY 17 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 18 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

Finally, I indicated before Christmas that we would provide regular updates on the situation in Syria. The intention is that there will be a further statement shortly on matters in Syria.

Chris Bryant: There have been two fire alarms in the Palace this week, and on both occasions there was great confusion among Members and members of the public. May I urge the Leader of the House to initiate a review of those arrangements as soon as possible?

Last week I asked whether the Leader of the House plans to delay the Queen’s Speech until after the EU Referendum. He refused to answer, which is of course usual, but we all now know that the Government intend to extend this Session beyond 23 June. We know that not because the Leader of the House has told the House, but because Downing Street has told The Times. I know that, as a Brexiteer, the Leader of the House is not allowed to see Government papers any more, but one would think that the Government would at least allow him to know when the recess dates will be. So come on, just tell us: will the Queen’s Speech be after 23 June, will there be a Whitsun half-term recess, will the House sit during the week of the referendum, and will he give us the dates through to the end of the year? Before he goes all pompous about this—oh no, it is too late for that—I just say to him that Members from across the House, and, for that matter, the staff who work in this building, all want answers to these questions.

The terrible news about the article in The Times is that Downing Street has also said that there is going to be a reshuffle after the referendum and that the Leader of the House tops the list of those who are going to be sacked. I, for one, am beginning to feel very, very sorry for him, so I have been searching the job pages for him. Sadly, the only thing that seemed even vaguely suitable was working as an unpaid voluntary intern for the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), but unfortunately he says in the job description that he wants somebody who is a “good team player”, so that rules out the Leader of the House. All the other jobs say they want someone with a good sense of humour—need I say more? He need not worry though: I am sure the Prime Minister will give him a glowing reference.

The previous Parliament was the zombie Parliament—for months on end the House had no proper business—and now we have the return of the living dead. They walk among us, they look like Ministers, and they are paid like Ministers, but they are doomed. They hate the Prime Minister; they think he is damaging the economy and putting our security at risk. Frankly, the only thing that is keeping them in the Government is the £23,570.89 in extra salary they will get come 23 June.

How do the Government intend to fill the business between now and then? Here are my suggestions. One: I have married a lot of people in my time—to one another, as a vicar, that is—but it has always seemed wrong to me that marriage certificates include the names of the fathers of the bride and groom but not the mothers. Even the Prime Minister says that he wants to change this, but apparently he has written to one of our Members saying there is not enough time. Well, there is clearly now going to be enough time to do it in this Session. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) has a handy private Member’s Bill to be considered tomorrow: why do not the Government adopt it or help it into Committee so that it can be amended?

Two: I am delighted that the Government are no longer going to water down freedom of information, but should we not extend it to private companies engaged on public sector contracts? How much did the Government’s preposterous review cost? The Leader of the House might as well tell us now, because he knows full well that if he does not we are going to put in a freedom of information request and he will have to tell us in the end anyway.

Three: I am glad that Adele did so well at the Brits last week, but tickets to see her live are now selling on the secondary market for up to £24,000. This market pretends to support the arts, but actually it just leeches off them. The Business Department’s review of the ticket resale market closed on 20 November. When is it going to be published, and when will the Government legislate to put an end to this pernicious, parasitical secondary market?

The hon. Members for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) and for Salisbury (John Glen) and I have long been calling for a parliamentary inquiry into concussion in sport. This week, more than 70 doctors and health experts have written to the Government calling for a ban on tackling in school rugby games. I do not want youngsters wrapped in cotton wool, but given that it is
12 years since the West Bromwich Albion footballer Jeff Astle died of chronic traumatic encephalopathy brought on by heading the ball, five years since 14-year-old Ben Robinson died of second impact syndrome, and Will Smith’s new film “Concussion” shows how the NFL failed to protect its players and ended up with a legal bill of $1 billion, is it not time that we set up a proper parliamentary inquiry to make sure that we get all the facts out there?

Next week sees the 100th anniversary of Harold Wilson’s birth. He gave women, for the first time, control over their own property and their bodies; he abolished the death penalty; he decriminalised homosexuality; he introduced the first race relations Act; and he won the referendum to stay in Europe. He ended censorship and created the Open University and the Arts Council. For that matter, under him we won the Eurovision song contest—I know the Leader of the House is obsessed with this—three times; three times more than we have ever won it under the Tories. Is it not outrageous that we have a louring statue of Mrs Thatcher, who made my constituents’ lives miserable, but just a bust of Harold Wilson, who made this country a civilised society?

Chris Grayling: I very much hope that we will win the Eurovision song contest under the Conservative party next year, with that great band MP4 leading the charge for the nation.

In order to understand what does and does not work with fire drills, it is, of course, necessary to carry them out. Lessons will be learned from the experience earlier this week, but I extend my thanks to all the Officers of the House who were involved in the fire drill. They will now work out how to make sure that our processes are appropriate and suitable for the future.

We will announce the date of the Queen’s Speech when we have decided the date of the Queen’s Speech. As always, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) makes the mistake of believing that what he reads in the papers is what is actually going to happen. We will take a decision on the Queen’s Speech and we will announce it to this House, as usual.

We have to be mindful of the need to ensure the progress of business. The hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. It is somewhat ironic that, on the one hand, he asks, “Where are the recess dates?” while on the other he says, “This is a zombie Parliament with no serious business.” He is completely wrong. I have just set out plans for the Second Reading of the Policing and Crime Bill next week. That really important measure will restore a sensible balance to many aspects of our policing and justice system. I have also announced the Second Reading of the Investigatory Powers Bill, which will be crucial in enabling us to defend our country. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that that is a feature of a zombie Parliament, then frankly he does not know what the word “zombie” means.

May I echo the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the work done collectively by Members across the House, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), on the issue of head injuries? I know how serious an issue it is. The Children’s Trust is situated in Tadworth Court, just outside my constituency, and it does a brilliant job in helping children who have had the most terrible experiences. The issue should be of concern to Members on both sides of the House. I hope very much that the Select Committee will pick up on the work that my hon. Friend and others have done and write a full report. The hon. Gentleman asked for a parliamentary investigation, and the best way to do that is through the Select Committee.

The Welsh affairs debate will take place later today. It was, of course, St David’s day this week, and I extend my good wishes to all Welsh Members of Parliament. I am looking forward to 5 May, when the people of Wales will have the chance to get rid of a failing Labour Administration.

It is a bit of a relief to me to see the shadow Leader of the House in better spirits today than he was yesterday. I do not know whether others noticed that he looked utterly miserable during Prime Minister’s questions, but I understand why. It was not just because the Leader of the Opposition spent last Saturday, just like old times, at a CND rally, or because he has appointed the former Finance Minister of the Greek Syriza Government as his new economic adviser, although heaven knows how any self-respecting Member on the Labour Front Bench could take that appointment seriously. It was not even because a former shadow Cabinet member said of the Leader of the Opposition’s appearance at the parliamentary party meeting on Monday:

“Expectations were rock-bottom—and he fell below them”.

The most bizarre claim to come from the Labour leadership this week was when the Leader of the Opposition said that he gets his moral compass from “Eastenders”. Surely not even the shadow Leader of the House can think that this is a man fit to be Prime Minister.

I understand that it is hard for someone who has decided, as the shadow Leader of the House has, to become a cheerleader for a team he clearly does not support. I would be happy to grant him a debate on learning from the lessons of history, because he is the man who says he is proud to have stuck a knife in the back of Tony Blair. Only this week, however, he seems to have had second thoughts and has started to show signs of thinking again, because he told a group of students:

“I’m going to talk about Tony Blair, I think we’re still allowed to speak about him”.

Of course, those were the days when Labour was a serious political party.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Some French Minister has apparently been saying today that if we have the nerve to come out of the EU, all 4,000 people in Calais will be put on rubber boats and come across to Britain, because the French do not want anything to do with them. If I were a Frenchman, I would be hugely embarrassed by my Government. If a country that is two and a half times the size of this country, with roughly the same population, cannot disperse 4,000 people and look after them, it should be ashamed of itself. Could we have a statement next week from the Foreign Secretary on whether it is the Government’s position that, if we come out of the EU, we would have more rather than less immigration to this country?

Chris Grayling: I am absolutely certain that the Foreign Secretary will be back before the House shortly, so there will be an opportunity for my hon. Friend to put that
point to him. In the last couple of weeks, I have heard the French Interior Minister reassure us that the French Government would not wish to put at risk the bilateral agreements over border controls between the United Kingdom and France.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I, too, thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week’s business. Today is World Book Day, and it is worth noting, especially as I am chair of the all-party writers group, the wonderful wealth of writers that we have in this country and the power of literature to bring joy to people and enhance their lives.

The Leader of the House and I now have a joint experience in fighting referendums. We have both been on the sharp end of various “Project Fears”. In the Scottish referendum, I experienced “Project Fear”, and he is now experiencing the new “Project Euro-fear” as he leads the campaign to yank the UK out of the EU. The scaremongering from the in side is almost straight out of the useless and dysfunctional Better Together manual, and it is likely to cause as much damage to the in campaign as it caused to the massive lead of the no campaign, which was shredded, in Scotland. As a supporter of our place in the EU, I want that counterproductive scaremongering to stop, although I presume that the Leader of the House is quite happy with it, given that it will probably work in his interest. Can we have a debate about positive campaigning, and can we encourage everybody to ensure that when we debate our place in Europe, we do so as positively as possible?

We need an urgent statement from the Defence Secretary on Trident. Apparently, he is just about to declare that Trident renewal is already under way, before we have had the opportunity to approve that in the House. It is absolutely appalling that the Defence Secretary can simply take the House for granted, and he must come to the House and explain himself. Scotland rejects Trident, and we intend to make it a huge issue in the Scottish elections. We simply refuse to have that weapon of mass destruction dumped on our nation without any approval from the House.

What do we do now, Mr Speaker, about large parts of Scottish funding? On English-only legislation, you are to lay aside minor or consequential issues when certifying legislation as English only, even though they have huge Barnett consequentials to Scotland. The Leader of the House told us that the mysteries of the Barnett consequentials lie in the mystery of the estimates. I tried to debate estimates in the estimates day debate, but I was ruled out of order within two minutes and 46 seconds. Somebody, somewhere, has to tell us how we should get that addressed and when we, as Scottish Members, will get to discuss, debate and vote on the critical issue of the Barnett consequentials.

Finally, the irony of last night’s debate on the Lords amendments on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, in which Tory after Tory lambasted all those wicked Lords, was not lost on Scotland. For the Tories, however, the Lords are only to be chastised when they do not do the Tories’ business, and to ensure that that happens, the Lords are going to introduce another 40 amendments to the Bill. Why do the Tories not just back us? Instead of trying to gerrymander that bizarre House, how about working with us and getting rid of the whole shooting match altogether?

Chris Grayling: I agree with the hon. Gentleman on the need for positive campaigning, and I hope that all who are involved in the debate over our membership of the European Union in the coming months will take a positive approach and set out the facts so that the British people can take their decisions. I gently chide him for mentioning “Project Fear” when he talked about positive campaigning, and I remind him of the things that he said about the introduction of English votes for English laws. To listen to what he said, one would have thought that about as much doom and gloom and disaster as possible would fall on us, but it is not entirely clear to me that that has happened. The Union has not fallen apart because of the introduction of English votes for English laws, and the Scottish people I know think that it is entirely fair.

The hon. Gentleman raised Trident. If he is concerned to bring the Defence Secretary to the House to explain himself, there are mechanisms in the House by which the hon. Gentleman can do so. He can either seek your consent, Mr Speaker, or use the other avenues that are available to him, and I am sure that he will choose to do so. He talks about Trident being “dumped on our nation”, as he phrases it. I remind him of all the people in Scotland whose livelihoods depend on Trident, and of the people in the north-west of England whose jobs depend on the future replacement of Trident. Is he really saying he wants all those jobs to disappear? Is he really saying he wants the area around Rosyth to end up abandoned and without an economic role for the future? I do not think that is in the interests of those communities. I have to say that it is in the interests of Scotland and the United Kingdom that we retain a nuclear deterrent both for our national security and to ensure there are jobs in the parts of the United Kingdom that need them.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the estimates debates. I simply remind him that he is a member of the Liaison Committee, which chooses the subjects for debate on estimates days. The Committee is perfectly free to hold discussions on any aspects of public spending, and it chose to do so on Foreign and Commonwealth Office matters. It is for the hon. Gentleman, who sits on the Committee, to secure the debates he wants.

The position of the hon. Gentleman’s party on the Lords has been well set out. I must say that I think the Lords plays a role in helping to improve the quality of legislation in this place, but I suspect that we are never going to agree on that subject.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): In recent months, five coal-fired power stations have announced that they will close, potentially close or partially close: five coal-fired power stations over 2025, but market conditions mean that the closures may come far sooner. May we have a debate in Government time on energy policy and the role that existing power station infrastructure can play?

Chris Grayling: I understand my hon. Friend’s concerns, and I heard her question at Prime Minister’s questions yesterday. She is freely able to bring forward the subject in an Adjournment debate or to seek consent for a Back-Bench debate to have it discussed in the House.
The matter clearly affects the constituencies of a number of hon. Members, and I encourage her to bring that subject forward for discussion.

**Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab):** If this Session of Parliament runs beyond June, will the Leader of the House consider giving us more days for Back-Bench business and for private Members’ Bills? If he gives us more days, will he put the Bill I am promoting with support from colleagues on both sides of the House—for the automatic registration of children for free school meals and the school premium—at the top of the list on one of those days? That is the one move we could make between now and the summer holidays that would have a real effect on poor families.

**Chris Grayling:** The right hon. Gentleman has a long track record of pursuing social reforms of that kind, and I will certainly look very carefully at what his Bill proposes. Of course, the progress of business in the House very much depends on our success in getting Government business through. We have a substantial programme—it was set out in our manifesto—to bring forward and complete by the end of this Session. I want to make sure that the dates set for both the Queen’s Speech and for the end of this Session and the recess are consistent with our need to ensure that our manifesto is implemented.

**Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con):** Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the impact of c2c timetable changes on the lives of commuters who live in Southend? The company has at long last accepted that there is overcrowding and it has ordered new rolling stock, but it has just announced that it will not be arriving.

**Chris Grayling:** I commend my hon. Friend for the work he is doing on behalf of his constituents on an issue that, in different ways and on different lines, affects very many of us. The Transport Secretary will be in the Chamber for questions next Thursday, and I encourage my hon. Friend to raise the issue directly with Ministers. He is doing a good job in keeping the company under pressure at a time when there are clearly serious issues about the delivery of the service on that line.

**Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab):** As Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, I wrote to the Leader of the House to look for assistance in getting protected time for particular debates. The debate on gangs and serious youth violence was bumped, but has now been rescheduled for later today. On Tuesday, which is International Women’s Day, we have a particularly time-sensitive debate on International Women’s Day. I asked the Leader of the House to give an undertaking that the time for that debate would be protected. I have received a reply, and I am afraid to say that no such undertaking has been given. That is regrettable, because it is possible that there will be urgent questions and statements and that the Enterprise Bill will run, which would curtail the time for the International Women’s Day debate. We have already seen evidence that such protected time is required from time to time. Will the Leader of the House please reconsider that matter?

**Chris Grayling:** As I have said, I have given that matter careful consideration. I have looked at the flow of business on Back-Bench days and will watch carefully next Tuesday. I am sure that you and I, Mr Speaker, will want to ensure that there is proper time for debate on that day. At the same time, I have to be mindful of the working hours of staff and of this House, so I do not want to make significant changes without being confident that there is a real problem that needs to be solved, rather than an occasional problem. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will keep the matter under review, but my hope and intention is that we will have proper time available next week.
have been given and taking some of the decisions that other Governments have to take, which they have so far insulated themselves from.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the last few weeks, there have been many stories in the media about gamblers and addiction. Tony Franklin lost his money, his job and his family, and claims that fixed odds betting terminals were the reason. It is clear that the gambler stands little chance of leaving the roulette table with heavier pockets than when he entered. There is a need to change the legislation on fixed odds betting terminals. Would the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on that matter?

Chris Grayling: Unfortunately, we have just had Culture, Media and Sport questions, when the hon. Gentleman would have had an opportunity to raise that matter with the Ministers concerned. They will, of course, be back before the House in due course. I am aware that this is a matter of concern across the House. It might be possible to take the subject to the Backbench Business Committee if his concerns are shared across the House.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If the Government persist with their intention of delaying the vote on Trident renewal until after the Labour party conference, it will become harder for pro-defence and pro-Trident Labour MPs to vote in favour of renewal. May we please have the date on which the debate and vote will take place, especially if more time will be made available by extending the length of the Session?

Chris Grayling: I know about my right hon. Friend’s concerns over the timing of the debate. I will make sure that his views are fed into the discussions about when the debate should happen.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): This week, a Select Committee in the Lords found that, contrary to Government claims, the Trade Union Bill will profoundly affect Labour party funding. Previously, the Leader of the House had a letter from the Minister forSkills, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), seeking to make concessions on the Bill. Will the Leader of the House now agree to the concessions and commit to cross-party talks to reach a fair and long-lasting settlement on party funding?

Chris Grayling: Of course, that is a matter of discussion and debate in the Lords, and the Lords Committee has made recommendations. We are trying to provide a sensible balance for the future. [Interruption.] The shadow Leader of the House says, “Oh no you’re not”, but the Conservative party has to seek voluntary contributions from individuals who choose to back it. The Labour party has depended on a system in which people have to go beyond the extra mile to take themselves out of automatic contributions.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): One of the major issues to be debated during the European referendum campaign will be the size of the UK’s net contribution. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate so that those of us who are in favour of leaving the EU can outline the infrastructure projects and improvements to public services on which we could spend that money? It would also provide others with an opportunity to try to defend why money should go to Europe rather than be spent in their constituencies.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes his point in his customarily succinct way. Of course, we have just had an all-day debate on our EU membership, and I am absolutely certain that it will not be the last time these matters are debated in this House between now and June.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on the dodgy dossier that the Government have produced in advance of the EU referendum? I do not know whether you, Mr Speaker, saw the Minister for the Cabinet Office skewered on the “Daily Politics” by Andrew Neil yesterday when he tried to back up his claim that Norway had to abide by three quarters of the EU’s laws. Andrew Neil pointed out that the figure was actually 9%. If the Government are prepared blatantly to lie so badly on that issue, perhaps we need a full debate on the dodgy dossier to see how many other blatant lies they are prepared to resort to.

Chris Grayling: I would simply say that I hope everyone will set out their views and the facts in a completely dispassionate way.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Hannah Morris, the fantastic Camden youth mayor, is stepping down later this year. When I have spoken to young constituents, the point has been made to me over and over that young people feel disfranchised from politics and disengaged from Parliament. That has been exacerbated by the Government’s refusal to lower the voting age and their scrapping of policies such as education maintenance allowance. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate in the House on young people’s worrying disengagement from this Parliament, the mother of Parliaments?

Chris Grayling: We talked earlier about the importance that the education centre plays in this place and the importance of bringing as many young people as possible into Parliament. All of us individually have a duty on this matter, and I spend quite a lot of time talking to groups of sixth-formers in my constituency. I am sure the hon. Lady does the same. Every one of us has a duty to go out and explain why the decisions that we take in Parliament and the issues that we debate are of material importance to young people, and why they should vote and take an interest.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Can time be found for a debate on the effects of uncontrolled immigration into the UK, which would be one of the impacts of our remaining in the EU? It has a massive impact on people’s access to services, healthcare, school places and decent wages, and it is extremely important to my constituents.

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He may have seen the serialisation of the new book by Tom Bower over the past few days, which has exposed just how complicit the Labour Government were in opening our borders and allowing uncontrolled immigration to this country. Those who were part of
that party and that Government should be forever ashamed of the way in which they allowed uncontrolled immigration—not managed immigration or immigration organised in a careful way—as a deliberate policy. They should be ashamed of that.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Has the Leader of the House received a request from any Minister to make a statement explaining why the wheels have come off the Brexit BMW, or perhaps a request from an individual Member who has performed a handbrake turn on EU membership to make a statement explaining their diversion? Such statements would provide the public with critical facts about the weaknesses of the Brexit case and the motivation of some people in supporting it.

Chris Grayling: No, I have not.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Has the Leader of the House seen reports that plans are being drawn up to reclassify e-cigarettes as tobacco products for tax purposes? Vapers and the sector accept that some additional duty should be charged, but the consequence of the proposal is that the price of e-cigarettes to consumers will more than double. Public Health England has deemed e-cigarettes to be 95% safer than tobacco, so may we have a debate to consider taxation of those products to ensure that they remain an effective method of smoking cessation?

Chris Grayling: I know that my hon. Friend raises a matter of concern, which affects a large number of people. I suspect that it is the sort of proposal that causes uncertainty and disquiet about decisions made in Brussels. I very much hope that no decision on the matter will be made without due care and attention, and without due focus on whether e-cigarettes are a good way of enabling people to move away from smoking.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate in Government time on the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report, which showed that 10 of the 12 towns and cities in greatest economic decline are in the north of England? Not a single town in the south is among the worst 24 listed. That causes real concern about the vision of a northern powerhouse. We urgently need a debate, particularly as Steve Rumbelow, the chief executive of my council, Rochdale—which, incidentally, is listed as the town in the greatest economic decline—has accused the foundation of using out-of-date figures, which mask the progress made in northern regions.

Chris Grayling: It never ceases to amaze me that Labour Members do not understand why the northern powerhouse is needed. It is because, when they were in power, the manufacturing sector of this country almost halved. Northern towns declined steadily—Labour policies failed the north of this country unreservedly. That is why we need a northern powerhouse, which helps to contribute to the significant fall in unemployment across the north of England. We inherited high unemployment in those towns and cities, and we are sorting it out.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments about St David’s day, and I look forward to the Welsh affairs debate later. Cardiff and Wales held the rugby world cup at the turn of the millennium. Since then, we have held the FA cup finals, the Ryder cup, the UEFA super cup and Ashes tests, and played our part in the Olympics. I pay tribute to the Scottish Government for what they did with Glasgow and the Commonwealth games. Is it not time to have a debate about what we can do to chivvy and encourage the Welsh Labour Government to put in a bid for the Commonwealth games to come to Cardiff?

Chris Grayling: London did a fantastic job of hosting the Olympics, Glasgow did a fantastic job of hosting the Commonwealth games, and I would love to see the Commonwealth games come to Cardiff. I echo my hon. Friend’s view and I hope that the Welsh community will come together and find the right moment to make that bid for the future.

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): Last week, I discreetly visited the besieged district of Sur in Diyarbakir. I witnessed almost incontrovertible evidence of suppression of civil liberties and worrying signs of the potential for more civilian deaths. Given Diyarbakir’s proximity to Syria, the fact that Turkey is a NATO ally, and emerging evidence that Turkey is targeting US and UK-backed Kurdish forces fighting against Daesh in Syria, will the Leader of the House commit to a debate in Government time to allow Members to discuss the nature of our relationship with our NATO allies?

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, I have agreed with my colleagues in Government and made provision for a further statement on the situation in Syria shortly. That will give the hon. Lady an opportunity to raise that very point.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Tomorrow, I will be at New College in Huddersfield with the Anthony Nolan “Register & Be a Lifesaver” programme. May we have a debate on bone marrow donation, blood donation and organ donation to see how we can increase the number of people involved in those programmes and raise awareness?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I pay tribute to everyone involved in that important work, particularly in his constituency. He raises an issue that has, over the months, been of concern to Members of all parties. Again, it might be a subject that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee would like to consider as an opportunity for a Thursday.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Next Thursday will be exactly 29 years since the brutal murder of Daniel Morgan of Llanfrechfa, who was investigating police corruption in south London. This week, “Panorama” gave a vivid account of the extraordinary amount of corruption that existed in the Metropolitan police. I am one of the few people in the House to have read, under strict surveillance, the Tiberius report. It is the most deeply shocking document I have read in my life. Will the Government publish it—perhaps next Thursday—so that the whole country can understand the breadth and depth of police corruption in this city?

Chris Grayling: I will ensure that the Home Secretary is aware of the hon. Gentleman’s concerns. I am not aware of the detail of the report, but I will make sure that she responds to his request.
Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Unfortunately, a number of my constituents have recently been the victim of a substandard building firm that, when challenged, liquidates itself only to quickly re-establish itself in a new guise. May we have a debate on such abuse of company law?

Chris Grayling: It is obviously disturbing when one hears of such incidents. The Business Secretary will be here in 10 days’ time, and current procedures for director disqualification allow members of the public to lodge direct complaints when such issues arise, so that they can be investigated.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we debate internet awareness? The Prime Minister’s explanation of his damascene conversion on Sunday trading between April and June last year is the existence of internet shopping—in other words, between April and June he discovered the internet. Is that not just an empty excuse for a broken promise that will affect workers not just in England and Wales, but also in Scotland and Northern Ireland?

Chris Grayling: Those measures also include provisions to improve workers’ rights, and the hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to debate all those matters when the provisions are brought before the House. If he has concerns, he will be able to raise them then, and vote accordingly.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): All Members of the House recognise how sensitive pensions are, and that any changes we make impact on individuals—we have seen that with the raising of the pension age for women. I understand that there may be further general changes to pensions. Will the Leader of the House guarantee that should that happen, we will have sufficient time to debate them in this House, and to consider the impact that they will have on our constituents’ quality of life?

Chris Grayling: I know that the Chancellor will want to take great care when bringing forward any proposals to reform the pension system. I do not know what will be in the Budget, but whatever there is, there will be ample time to debate it in this House. Such matters must be handled enormously carefully, and we do not want to make the same disastrous mistakes that Gordon Brown and the Labour party made when they were in government.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I wish to outline an important case. I am supporting Kath and Tom Leary, who are parents seeking answers following the death of their son, Wayne, who was killed in a hit-and-run accident in 2010. The driver, Colin McDonald, is a criminal with little regard for human life. He was on bail for a serious stabbing, having already been given early release for the manslaughter of Jonathan Tripp. Colin McDonald was sentenced for that stabbing and hit and run, but again he was let out on early release on licence until 2021. Last week he was again sentenced for another manslaughter, of Dominic Doyle. The parents want answers. How can a justice system that is meant to give people confidence do this to people? Will the Leader of the House support me in securing a meaningful debate on the issue?

Chris Grayling: In my time as Justice Secretary I was involved in discussions on a number of such cases, and we introduced measures to tighten the law. We also started a broader review of the laws on motoring, precisely to see whether further steps needed to be taken in tragic cases of this kind. The Lord Chancellor will be here next Tuesday, and from past experience of constituency matters, I encourage the hon. Gentleman to use the Adjournment debate system to bring a Minister to the House, go through the case in detail, and look for changes that can make a difference to families who have been through the most terrible situations.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Local councils must help to maintain trust in politics by openly discussing and transparently agreeing their budget, and by explaining the savings, efficiencies and programmes that they will undertake. Does the Leader of the House agree that councils such as Eastleigh Borough Council must lead the way, because it is struggling to explain openly its future budgets to the public? May we have a debate on open and balanced council budget setting, so that MPs can highlight the importance of vital local decisions and how they must be clearly and roundly understood by residents?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is a curious irony, given who controls her borough council. The Liberal Democrats argue for openness, but do not necessarily deliver it when in power. I am sure that if the decisions they take are as opaque as she is suggesting, they will not be holding that power for very much longer. It is of course important that local government is transparent, explains the decisions it takes and sets out why, when it has had to take difficult decisions, it has chosen that route rather than any other.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Yesterday in Westminster Hall we had a debate about the chaos on Southeastern trains. The Minister gave us some reassurances that things were improving, but last night I got a phone call from a concerned constituent who was on a train. He was told by the driver that the signalers had mistakenly put the train on the wrong line, so it would not be visiting any of the stations the passengers on the train intended to go to. My constituent said to me, “We are used to the chaos, but this is downright dangerous.” May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Transport about safety on our railways and, in particular, Southeastern? This is going too far.

Chris Grayling: Obviously a situation like that is unacceptable. Every service is occasionally subject to human error, but nobody would seek to defend a situation of that kind. The Secretary of State for Transport is here on Thursday and will be able to take questions on the challenges in relation to Southeastern trains. They are, to a significant degree, being generated by the huge investment we are putting into London Bridge. That means some disruption in the meantime, but it will mean a better service for passengers in the future.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): At the most recent Council of Europe meeting we initiated a debate on the media portrayal of the women abused in Cologne and in other places at new year. The media had not reported
the situation fully or in a timely fashion. May we have a debate on that in this House, because the BBC was one of the media groups identified?

Chris Grayling: It is not acceptable for the media, in particular a free media, not to set out the facts when they arise. I commend my hon. Friend for his work in the Council of Europe. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary has taken note of his comments.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Four weeks ago, in response to my question about the 1955 UK–Malawi tax treaty, the Leader of the House very helpfully replied that he would ask the Foreign Office to give me a detailed response. The quill pens are writing slowly. When can I expect a response?

Chris Grayling: I am sorry about that. I will give the FCO a kick after this session.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): May we have a debate on the midlands engine, the important role manufacturing plays in our regional economy, and how the Government can provide further support to this vital sector?

Chris Grayling: I commend all those in the midlands who are working so hard to revitalise business in that part of the country. The midlands is another area that was badly affected by the collapse in manufacturing in the years of the Tony Blair and Gordon Brown Labour Governments. We are now seeing real investment and real progress, for example in the automotive industry. In the midlands, we are seeing an expansion of capacity, new investment and new jobs created. It is a sign that the midlands, under a Conservative Government, is going from strength to strength.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Earlier this week I took part in a workshop delivered by the Alzheimer’s Society. MPs from across the House attended in order to become dementia friends. May we have a debate on what more can be done to support those living with dementia, and their carers and families, and in particular how we can extend the blue badge parking scheme to those facing dementia-related challenges?

Chris Grayling: I commend all those in this House who have trained to become dementia friends. Members of the Cabinet did the same a while back. It is enormously important that we all understand the impact of dementia. I had an elderly relative who suffered from dementia. My understanding of what she went through, having taken the training, is now much greater. I praise all those who deliver it. This is a subject the Backbench Business Committee might like to consider. There is a demand for subjects to debate and the hon. Lady may wish to bring this forward for consideration.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, there is a shortage of engineers in the UK. May we have a debate on career advice for young people who are approaching school-leaving age? After all, how else are we going to have enough engineers to build the network of hedgehog highways around the country?

Chris Grayling: Well, Mr Speaker, we were all waiting—and we were not disappointed. I gather that my hon. Friend has now got his petition past 20,000 signatures, so we are on the way to debating it in the House, for which I commend him. This nation’s hedgehog population has every reason to be grateful to him. On a more serious note, the solution to the problem is very much at the heart of this Government’s strategy, with the huge expansion in the number of apprenticeships. In my view, these provide the best way of ensuring that we have the breadth of engineering skills that we need.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): A year ago today, the Tuberous Sclerosis Association started its “fight4treatment” campaign because sufferers of this pernicious disease are currently not able to access everolimus, the life-saving drug that they so desperately need. A year on, may we finally have a statement from a Health Minister about when the sufferers from this ultra-rare condition can finally get access to the treatment that can save their lives?

Chris Grayling: This is of course a matter that would normally go through the procedures of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, which decides which drugs it is right for the NHS to offer. I will, however, ask the Department of Health to respond to the hon. Gentleman on the issue he has raised.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This week we welcomed the new Indian high commissioner to a meeting in the House, and next week there is the celebration across the Indian sub-continent of Maha Shivratri, which commemorates the auspicious occasion of the wedding of Lord Shiva and Parvati. Can we find time—eventually—for a debate on the tremendous links between the UK and India, and the opportunities for business, trade, education and the opening up of services, because it has been a very long time indeed since we have had such a debate in this House?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is a powerful champion for the ties that exist between this country and India. I pay tribute to all members of the Indian diaspora in the UK, who play an important role in our society and our economy. The links of our Indian business community, not just with the sub-continent but with the Asian economy as a whole, are immensely valuable to us. In my view, we should continue to develop the best possible trade links with India for the future.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): May we have a statement on the uses of broadcast footage of the House of Commons? My constituent Charlie Brooker has raised with me—[Interruption.] He has, and he was one of my 270-something constituents who contributed to my majority. He has raised with me the problem that he is unable to use such footage in his programme “Screenwipe”, yet other not too dissimilar broadcasters are allowed to use it. It depends on whether the programme is satire, light entertainment or factual. Given how vague these boundaries are and the fact that these rules
were dreamt up some 27 years ago, does not the right hon. Gentleman agree that now is a good juncture to revisit this matter and have a statement on it?

Chris Grayling: If it is a matter of concern to the hon. Lady, she should make a submission to the Administration Committee. However, I think it is very important to ensure that the coverage of this House’s debates is used in an appropriate way, and I am not in favour of making it available to satire programmes.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): In other referendum news, I know that the Leader of the House will be paying close attention to the outcome of the referendum on the Mayor of Bath and North East Somerset, which is coming up on 10 March. It is opposed by me and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), as well as by pretty much every other local party. Will my right hon. Friend join me in opposing a Mayor for Bath and North East Somerset, and consider having a debate in Government time on its huge cost and its impact on reducing democratic accountability?

Chris Grayling: I am sure that I could not do a better job of influencing the people of Bath and Somerset than my hon. Friend, so I will leave it to him to make that case.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Yesterday at Prime Minister’s Questions, the Prime Minister admitted that he is going to go begging to the French President to try to get EDF to commit to Hinkley Point C. Later on in the session, he praised the Royal Mint without saying that it has been mooted for privatisation. Hinkley Point C and HS2 can happen only with Chinese investment. “For sale” signs are on the Green Investment Bank, Network Rail assets, air traffic services and Ordnance Survey, among others. May we have a debate in Government time on why the long-term recovery plan means owning nothing and being for ever in debt to other countries?

Chris Grayling: I always thought it was a good thing to attract international investment, but if it is now Scottish National party policy not to, I am sure investors will be able to come to England, Wales and Northern Ireland and not to Scotland. My own personal view is that we want international investment in Scotland, too.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Nuisance calls are an annoyance to many Members on both sides of the House, but they can cause real distress to the vulnerable and the elderly. The Government have already taken some steps, but may we have a debate about what more can be done to tackle this menace? [Interruption.]

Chris Grayling: The shadow Leader of the House is chuntering as usual, but I think that this is rather an important issue. Many elderly people suffer from nuisance calls, and the more that we can do to prevent them, the better. A great deal of work has been done by the Government and the regulatory authorities. However, my hon. Friend should take advantage of the opportunity presented by Business, Innovation and Skills questions on Tuesday week, or, indeed, table a written question to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, to ensure that we do not ease the pressure on sorting the problem out.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I request the right hon. Gentleman’s assistance? The 90-strong all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood has sought a meeting with the public health Minister to discuss the consultation that is currently taking place, but she has refused to meet us. Many of our constituents are rather perplexed: they do not understand why, in the middle of a public consultation, the public health Minister will not meet MPs and listen to what has been said by people who have been affected by the worst treatment disaster in the history of the NHS. Might the Leader of the House be able to intervene and ask the Minister to reconsider her position?

Chris Grayling: I will certainly make inquiries on the hon. Lady’s behalf. In the meantime, I hope that the preparations for the year of culture are going well in Hull.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): This morning, in the Vote Office, I picked up a copy of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, which authorises, for the year ending 31 March 2017, Government spending of £258,322,682,000. Last night, the Bill received its First, Second and Third Readings in the space of three minutes. When, during those three minutes, did I, as a Scottish MP, have an opportunity to debate and amend Barnett consequentials arising from the Bill?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman clearly did not do enough of a job in persuading his hon. Friends on the Liaison Committee to secure such a debate. That is the route to decisions on what we discuss during debates on estimates. I advise him to talk to his hon. Friends more closely next time.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I was disappointed to learn of the closure of the Fab Lab in Ellesmere Port, which provides advice and opportunities for entrepreneurs to develop their ideas and represents an important part of the future of manufacturing, as well as contributing to the regeneration of the high street. If the Government are really serious about the northern powerhouse, why are they allowing this excellent facility to close? May we please have a debate so that we can ask when Ministers will start putting their words into action?

Chris Grayling: Business Ministers will be here on Tuesday week. I do not know where the funding came from—whether it was national or local—because I do not know enough details of the individual case. However, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that unemployment in the north of this country, and business in the north of this country, are moving in the right direction, not the wrong one.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Services at popular walk-in clinics in Harrow are being put out to tender under the direction of the NHS procurement authority, including services at the Alexandra Avenue
Mr Gareth Thomas

Clinic, which is used by many of my constituents. May we have a debate in Government time so that we can discuss the role of the procurement authority, and, in particular, explore the question of why local GPs who are currently running walk-in clinics continue to be granted a stake in the long-running provision of such crucial services?

Chris Grayling: Local GPs are able to have a stake in the future of those services. Local GPs are, typically, private organisations providing services for the NHS, and if those services are put out to tender, GPs are perfectly able to demonstrate that they are best placed to do the work.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Despite his funny ways and daft policies, I have become very fond of the Leader of the House over recent months. One of the things that I think he is very good at is arranging regular debates on Syria, so that we do not put the issue on the back burner but, every now and again, have a good debate about it. Most people in this country would expect us to do the same when it comes to the European Union and the referendum. Every week, surely, we should have a major debate on that subject. Could we begin with a debate on the dreadful impact that leaving the EU would have on our universities? For most of us who represent university towns, the universities are our biggest employers and vital to our future, but not one vice-chancellor has come out in favour of Brexit. May we have an early debate, and a regular debate?

Chris Grayling: I am sure that we will have plenty of opportunities to debate European Union matters. We have just had a series of statements and debates on these issues and I am sure that the future of universities and their means of funding, whether direct or indirect via Brussels, will be a regular subject for debate.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): The Guardians of Scotland Trust is a Stirling-based charity which also involves the excellent Stirling Smith art gallery and museum. It is raising money to create a permanent memorial to Sir Andrew de Moray, who alongside William Wallace governed Scotland following the battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297. May we have a debate on recognising excellent fundraising efforts such as this?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is able to use the Back-Bench debate system or the Adjournment debate system to bring forward such a debate. This might also be a subject that he would like his colleagues in the Scottish Parliament to debate.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): The Leonard Cheshire care home in Littleborough provides care for 22 people with long-term disabilities. I visited the home last month and was truly taken aback by the lengths to which the staff will go to help their patients. However, Leonard Cheshire has decided to close the home, which is devastating for the patients, families and nurses. May we have a debate on the priorities of such charities?

Chris Grayling: It is obviously disappointing to hear of a change of that kind, although I do not know enough about the circumstances of that particular decision or the reasons behind it. I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise his concerns with the charities Minister—the Minister for Civil Society—either in questions or in an Adjournment debate.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): On 17 November, I wrote to the Department of Energy and Climate Change asking for a meeting after DECC officials had met in my constituency to discuss a deplorable situation relating to an open-cast mine that is still not being restored. Despite several follow-up phone calls, I have still not secured a meeting. On 2 November, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs promised me a substantive reply by 20 November on the case of Mr Thornhill that I have been chasing since 2010. I am still waiting for a reply. May I ask the Leader of the House to utilise his foot, which he has also offered to the Scottish National party, to assist my efforts to ensure justice for my constituents?

Chris Grayling: Of course I will chase that up for the hon. Lady.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Yesterday, a train carrying highly radioactive waste travelled through Gilmour Street station in Paisley, causing obvious anger and concern to commuters and residents alike. The Scottish Parliament is against nuclear weapons and new nuclear power, and we do not want those weapons or that waste travelling through our communities. Will the Leader of the House ensure that we get a statement setting out what safety precautions were put in place prior to that nuclear train setting off on its journey?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman might not remember this, but some years ago there was a very visible public demonstration of the safety of such trains to show just how robust the units that carry the radioactive waste are. Nuclear energy remains an important part of the electricity generation for the whole of the United Kingdom, and the waste will need to be moved around, but speaking as a former Minister involved in the whole area of health and safety, I can assure him that the safety standards are of the highest level.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last Friday, I visited Greenhead College, at which many of my young constituents study. Deep concern was expressed about the delays in the accreditation process for some of the Government’s new-style A-levels that are due to start this September. Without that accreditation, planning for the new curriculum cannot take place. This is leaving many teachers in limbo. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on this issue so that colleges and sixth forms can make the necessary plans for their new intake of students?

Chris Grayling: This is an obviously important issue. The Education Secretary will be here on Monday, and I will let her know that this concern has been raised today so that the hon. Lady can raise it again and get a proper response at that sitting.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Leader of the House has yet again failed to announce the recess dates. I can understand the political advantage in failing
to announce Prorogation, but hundreds of staff in this place are struggling to juggle their childcare arrangements and will now be unable to take holidays with their partners as a result of this. When will the Leader of the House stop this unnecessary power trip and show some respect for staff members in this House?

Chris Grayling: As I have set out time and again, the Government’s first and foremost task is to ensure the flow of business and to get our business across. We will announce the recess dates as soon as we can, but I am also committed to ensuring that we can deliver our manifesto.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The Wilton Lane allotments in Guisborough have been used as allotments for more than 100 years, and some families, including the Grouts, have had an allotment there for all that time. Part of that land is in the ownership of the denizens of Guisborough. The Tory chair of Guisborough Town Council wants to sell the land off for development, and went to the extent of asking the clerk of the council to strike a sentence to that effect from the record, so that that information could not be spread around the town.

May we have a debate on the powers and responsibilities of town and parish councils across our country?

Chris Grayling: On the matter of town and parish councils, I simply say that it is for the town and parish councillors to decide whether or not to take a step, and of course no individual can take a step without securing a majority vote from their council.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): With the working and child tax credit departments accepting only faxes and letters, and not emails, from constituency MPs’ offices, and with the Information Commissioner’s Office defining faxes as an unsecure form of communication, may we have a statement from Ministers confirming a full modernisation programme of upgrading communications to the 21st century?

Chris Grayling: Clearly, each Department has to work out the best way of receiving complaints and information about issues from Members’ offices. I hear the point the hon. Gentleman makes. The relevant Cabinet Office Minister is here next week for questions and I am sure he will want to make that point to him then.

Point of Order

11.40 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance as to whether I need to ask a Minister to correct the record and, if so, how I go about it. Yesterday, I attended the Committee on the draft Renewables Obligation Closure Etc. (Amendment) Order 2016, with which I am sure you are familiar. I spoke in the Committee, mentioning thousands of job losses in the solar industry. In her response, the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) said that I was making inaccurate comments and that the losses were not as I had described. I wanted to check that, so I have gone back and seen that the Government’s own impact assessment says that “between 9,700 and 18,700” jobs will be lost in the solar industry as a result of cuts to feed-in tariffs. The Solar Trade Association said in December that it knows of 1,800 redundancies since the general election and of three companies that have folded. To me, that seems as though I have my facts correct, yet I was rebuked for issuing incorrect information. I wonder how I can go about setting the record straight.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order, of which I did not have advance notice. I make no complaint about that, but I am therefore simply issuing a response off the cuff. She complains that she was “rebuked” for her observation, although she is satisfied, from her inquiries, that her observation was correct. I can say, for the completeness of the record, that she was not rebuked by or from the Chair; she was simply rebuked by an opponent in debate. The matter seems to me to be substantially one of debate and argument; she will say she is right and the Minister may well claim likewise.

When the hon. Lady asks me how she should proceed with this matter, my advice would be that she should go to the Table Office to table a question on the matter and see where that gets her with the Minister. Everybody in this place is responsible for the veracity of what is said in the Chamber or in Committees. It is incumbent upon a Member to correct the record if he or she has misled the House, but it is not for me to arbitrate on whether or not that has happened, especially as I was not present at the time. The hon. Lady is notably assiduous, and I feel sure that she will use the device that I have suggested to try to secure satisfaction. If she does not get that, we will no doubt hear from her again.
Backbench Business

Gangs and Serious Youth Violence

11.43 am

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to establish an independent, all-party commission, involving a wide-ranging consultation, to identify the root causes, effect of, and solutions to, serious youth violence, including knife crime, its links to gang culture and the sale of illegal drugs.

At the outset, I wish to say how grateful I am to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate, and I am also grateful to the 19 other Members of the House who supported this application. In particular, I have worked with my hon. Friends for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for Westminster North (Ms Buck), my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), among others, for several years on these issues.

The issues that we are discussing today are difficult. There is no single cause for the violence that we have seen, nor one single solution. What we are seeing on the streets of our country is leading to a senseless loss of lives. That perhaps explains why the digital debate organised on Twitter ahead of this debate by the House of Commons digital team was the House of Commons most successful such debate in terms of the number of Twitter accounts reached—more than 8 million. The hashtag for today’s debate is #stopyouthviolence. I recommend that anyone watching this debate uses it.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that our young people are among the very best in the world. Their creativity knows no bounds; their energy is infectious; and they put the great in Great Britain. They give us confidence that our future will be even better than our glorious past.

It is also important to note that the violence that we are talking about is committed by a minority—a significant minority—of young people. We should not draw the conclusion that all of Britain’s youth are engaged in serious youth violence. I say that because, too often, the youth of our country are demonised. They are demonised in our national media, and I do not want us to add to that today. It is important in this debate to recognise how wonderful our young people are and to celebrate them. It is because we care so much for them and because we do not want to see their talent and their futures wasted that we are holding this debate today.

In 2007, the violence in different communities—in urban city centres in particular—across our country was put into sharp relief by the shooting, in broad daylight, of a young man, Andre Smartt-Ford, at Streatham ice rink in my constituency. To this day, no one has been charged with Andre’s murder, but his mother continues to fight for justice and is now working through the JAGS Foundation to prevent other families from going through the same thing. Tracey Ford has voiced her strong support for this debate today. She is joined by many other parents, such as Richard Taylor, who also lost his young son, Damilola Taylor, to this violence. He set up the Damilola Taylor Trust, which established the Spirit of London Awards to celebrate our young people. Representatives from SOLA are here today. We pay tribute to all those parents and to those who are working to better the lives of our young people.

What followed from Andre’s death in 2007 was a catalogue of tragedy, with 29 teenagers losing their lives in London alone in 2008. The number of fatalities has abated since that time, but, let us face it, the problem has never gone away. Following falls between 2009 and 2012, we have seen the number of serious youth violence offences in London increase by 13.4% and the number of offences the Metropolitan police tags with its gang violence indicator measure increasing by more than 25% since 2012. Much of this goes unreported. Members can go to any A&E in the kind of communities that I am talking about, and they will hear about all sorts of things that are not reported and that do not feature in the figures.

According to Citizens Report, which is a not-for-profit organisation that collects local data on this issue, 17 teenagers lost their lives to this violence last year, which is up from 11 in 2014. Just two weeks ago, I was notified by police of gunshots being fired on a Friday in a location in the north of my constituency. On the Saturday after, there was a multiple stabbing of a young man in the south of my constituency, and then on the Sunday, just outside my constituency, there was a drive-by shooting. On Monday this week at 5.30 in the afternoon, a teenager was stabbed in the north of my borough, in Oval, after a fight at a chicken shop, and so it goes on.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I am so pleased we have been granted three hours to debate a crucial issue not just for young Londoners, but for all communities. Does he agree that there are far too many firearms in circulation in London, and that previously, where a fist or, dare I say it, a knife might have been used, now a very large gun and increasingly sophisticated firearms are being used in these terrible crimes, and that makes the situation even more difficult to manage?

Mr Umunna: I entirely agree. When I was a trustee of a youth charity in Brixton called the 409 Project, I wrote an article in 2007 about the availability of guns and knives, and I did a kind of focus group with some of the young people in our area. What shocked me was the level of detail that some of our young people in Lambeth were able to give me about a gun—they could tell me how many bullets a MAC-10 could spray in a second or in a minute. My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue, and she is right to say that this is not just a London problem. The situation is serious and it is getting worse. It is not confined to London. Last Sunday a teenager was stabbed in Bristol. We hear of this happening all over the UK.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): In my constituency I have recently seen the impact of large-city drug crime moving into the regional towns, and I am very concerned to make sure that Avon and Somerset police devote enough resources away from the big cities such as Bristol to be able to combat that. I do not want see that deteriorate into violent crime which, thankfully, we have not yet seen, but what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the increase in London and Bristol is a worry.
Mr Umunna: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which highlights the suite of issues, including the drug trade, which hang heavy over this debate and will come through as our dialogue progresses.

I want to say something about the title of this debate. I put in for it using the word “gang” deliberately, because we need to talk about the use of this term. We often refer to youth violence and gang or gang-related violence, but it is pertinent for us to question whether we should use the word “gang” at all, in spite of the title of the debate.

Ian Joseph of Middlesex University, who is watching this debate from the Strangers Gallery, has done some very interesting work in this area. He argues that the official definition of a gang distorts the focus of interventions and promotes an understanding of everyday behaviour that does little to permanently avert young people from the real causes of violence. He argues that to be effective, interventions must give greater account to how cultural norms and social processes impact on young people’s friendships and the local neighbourhood-based relationships that they have.

This is backed up by others. The Centre for Criminal Justice Studies has also questioned whether we should be using that term. I wonder whether, by using the term and labelling young people as gang members, we reinforce the notion that they are gangsters. What is a gangster? I wonder how helpful it is for us to use the term. Let us face the fact that using the term enables officialdom to put all these young people in a bracket—“Oh, they’re part of a gang. If they lose their lives, oh well, that doesn’t matter. They’re part of a gang.” I am not sure we should allow this to carry on.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I regret interrupting the fine speech that is being made. Is my hon. Friend familiar with the work of Harriet Sergeant, a rare journalist who has gone to great trouble to engage with members of this underclass? Perhaps “gang” is the wrong word. From reading her books and articles on the matter, one comes away with a profound feeling of regret at the gulf of misunderstanding between official bodies and those who are part of that underclass, and great sympathy for the problems involved and the depth of suffering of those gangs who, in my view and her view, have been badly neglected.

Mr Umunna: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for referring to Harriet Sergeant’s work. Hopefully, those using the hashtag for this debate can post a link on Twitter so that those watching can read more of her work.

Part of the reason why I am not sure how helpful it is to use the word “gang” any more is that things have changed a lot just in the borough I represent in London. Around the time I was first elected, in 2010, we had mass groups of young people who had labels for their groupings. Now the situation is more parochial: things are often confined more to a particular estate, and we have much smaller groups of young people. The situation is also far more fluid.

Whitney Iles, the chief executive officer of Project 507—she, too, is watching the debate in the House—works to prevent young people from engaging in this kind of violence. She put things really well when she told me that we give young people this gang label, but we never give them a way to get rid of it. So let us consign it to the bin, and let us not refer to it again in the House after this debate, if we can possibly avoid doing so.

The reasons for serious youth violence are not new, and we know what so many of them are. Yes, some violence is carried out by young people from dysfunctional, often chaotic families with a history of, say, domestic violence in the background. However, very often, a lot of young people who get wrapped up in these things come from quite stable families. Sometimes there is an issue because two parents are struggling to make ends meet and holding down two jobs to pay the bills. There is a link there because, as I heard from some young people this morning, someone will often have a desire to help provide for their family—for their mum—and they get wrapped up in these activities as a way of making money to help mum pay the bills.

I really do not care if the usual suspects in the media start saying, “Oh, you’re excusing all this.” We are not providing excuses today, but unless we look at why these things happen, we will not be able to prevent them. I can see the headlines: “MP says children are trying to pay the bills so they go and knife people”. That is not what I am saying; what I am saying is that we must understand the underlying causes if we want to prevent this violence from happening again.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for making a very good speech. Is not fear the real reason why people join these groups? A young person who lives on an estate in an area where these groups operate and who is not a member of any group will be fearful that a group will set upon them and do them great damage. In my limited understanding of this problem, it seems that fear is the spur for young people joining such groups.

Mr Umunna: The hon. Gentleman makes a very important intervention. I agree with him: fear is definitely a major factor, and I will come to it shortly. Trauma also plays a role, and I will come to that too.

There is another common theme, which I have talked about with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham and my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North. Time and again, at every community meeting on this issue, we hear that there are simply not enough things for our young people to do. I get fed up with hearing that every week and every time we discuss this issue in the House, because nothing ever seems to get done about it. We have to ensure that there are more meaningful things for our young people to do outside school hours, and I am not talking about some windy church hall with a table tennis table. We need decent, proper activities that will expand our young people’s horizons and give them things they will enjoy doing in their local areas. Otherwise, we have the problem of collectives of their peers becoming their surrogate family. That relates to the issue that the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) talked about, but I will come on to that in a moment because I want to go through some of the other factors.

In relation to popular culture, it is too easy to blame rap music or whatever, but it is a society thing. We live in a society that promotes and glamorises violence. It is too easy to say that it is the fault of the creative industries. We increasingly have a society where our
young people are encouraged to engage in these kinds of violent activities. This is promoted among us and we have to deal with it.

We live in a society that not only promotes violence and too often glamorises it, but promotes an ideal whereby our young people define themselves by reference to what they have as opposed to who they are. There is a consumerism element. Helping one's family to get on is definitely an issue.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend acknowledge that this is not just about young people providing for their family but about their desire to have things, and the role of criminal gangs in offering them a quick buck, so that they are able to earn money to buy things, which because of their low income they are otherwise unable to have?

Mr Umunna: There are so many big elephants in this room of issues, but one is poverty and deprivation. We cannot ignore the part that that plays. My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. Young people who do not have anything are often robbing from other young people who do not have anything, then there is revenge, and we end up with a cycle of violence. That is definitely part of what we see happening.

Part of the reason that too many of our young people do not have enough money is the unemployment rate among them. Our education system is producing a whole generation who do not always have the skills that our employers need, particularly the technical and vocational skills. Let us face it, this has happened under Governments of all persuasions. I do not see this as a party political issue; I am not interested in scoring any points. We have to deal with the problems in a skills eco-system that is not giving our young people the skills that they need to offer employers to get a job. Let us not forget that hanging over this is the fact that youth unemployment is double the main rate.

The things I have spoken about are fairly obvious—the more talked-about factors—but we need to delve far deeper into the causes than we generally have. The hon. Member for Beckenham referred to the belief of many young people that they are safer in a group than they are on their own. As academics have argued, the perceived need for safety and protection tends to validate behaviour and levels of violence in ways that can obscure the boundary between right and wrong. There is also the issue of being bullied and how that interrelates with carrying or using a weapon. We do not like to talk about that, but we should. There is a semi-formal, often unsupervised daily routine outside school, but sometimes inside school too, that can incubate the production of behaviour and values that lead to a life of this kind of violence, and the expected norms of school and wider mainstream society are juxtaposed to that.

In addition to the fear that the hon. Gentleman talked about, the other big issue is trauma—the sheer trauma that many of our young people experience in their daily lives, which requires much greater consideration than we see reported in our media.

To return to the work of Whitney Iles, this issue needs to be seen as one not just of violence prevention, but of health, particularly mental health. Our young people are being traumatised by some of their experiences, but they are being given no support to deal with them. Unless we start engaging with them, not only on the obvious level, but at a deeper level, we will not be able to resolve the violence on our streets.

What should be done? First, the Labour Government introduced Every Child Matters, which had a strategic aim to provide wraparound care for young people from long before they went to school to long after they left. That did bring in teenagers, but I think we need to adopt an “every teenager matters” approach, with much more targeted schemes and versions of the previous initiative, in order to address problems experienced by teenagers. It must be said, however, that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham has said, the problems are impacting on younger and younger children, not just teenagers.

Secondly, we have to elevate the standing of youth work in our country. It is about time that we put it on the same pedestal as teaching. Often, youth workers spend as much time as teachers with our young people, but we do not talk about their profession in the same way. We have to do so and put it on a pedestal; we cannot just look at it as an add-on. Too often, youth work is left to people who have other jobs and who may, through their tenants or residents association, be providing youth work on top of their daily job. It needs proper funding so that people can do youth work full time and so that we regard our youth workers in the same way as we regard our teachers.

Thirdly, I really do think that the Government have done some good things, and that is why I want them to reverse their decision to disband the very important ending gang violence and exploitation peer review network, which spreads best practice to local authorities and others. It is due to end in April—next month—but I really hope the Government will reverse that decision, because it is a good network and I have heard very good feedback about it from all over the country, including Lambeth. I want it to continue.

Fourthly, we have to ensure that our young people are properly taught in school about the consequences of what they do, and that they are provided with support to deal with their experiences outside school as well. I want to see more role models who have been members of groups and who have been victims, or even perpetrators, of acts of violence and suffered the consequences. I want more of them to go into schools and tell their story so that future generations do not take the same wrong turn as they did. There is nothing like having somebody who has lived that life telling young people what will happen if they carry on down that avenue. We need to provide much more support to our schools.

This is controversial, but I do not care and am going to say it anyway: a lot of the young people who get wrapped up in all this ultimately have quite commercial and entrepreneurial instincts. Their energy, however, is simply not channelled in the right way and the result is that they turn to criminality and highly illegitimate, terrible ways of doing things. If many of our young people received enterprise teaching in our schools, and if they were provided with inspiration and more access to opportunities to set up their own business, do their own thing and work for themselves in a way that delivers the goods and some money, perhaps we would be able to stop them taking a wrong turn. I can just see
the write-ups saying, “MP says terrible gangsters should start businesses”, but, frankly, I do not care. If they have that kind of instinct, I want to make sure that they do not end up taking a wrong turn and doing illegitimate business, but that they set up a business and become the next Branson. I would like to see many of the kids from the Tulse Hill estate in my constituency going on to be the next Richard Branson.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important point. Does he agree that the Evening Standard should be congratulated on its campaign? He is recommending precisely the sort of work that it has been doing in support of people turning away from gang violence. It is turning young people’s skills and expertise towards business and entrepreneurship, and ensuring that they are able to make something of their lives.

Mr Umunna: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The Evening Standard has done excellent work in its “Frontline London” campaign, which it has plastered on the front page frequently. I would like to see other publications and media outlets following its example.

None of us is excusing wrongdoing; none of us is excusing the violence that we see; and none of us would argue that for people who commit such offences, there should not be sanctions. Of course there should be sanctions. I suppose the point that everybody will make today is that if we can prevent people from doing such things in the first place, we will not have to apply those sanctions. Too often, the debate is about clamping down, zero tolerance and bashing people up. It is harder to focus on how we prevent them from doing those things in the first place.

That is, ultimately, why I would like the Government to set up an independent cross-party commission on these issues, involving a wide-ranging consultation that, importantly, includes young people. Too often, we talk about young people but they are not at the table when we do so. I would like the commission to identify the root causes and effects of, and the solutions to, youth violence so that we do not see more death on our streets.

To wrap up, I think we should be absolutely honest, up-front and frank about the fact that if we were talking predominantly about middle-class children from comfortable, middle-income families and wealthy neighbourhoods, the issue would be much higher up the national agenda. The murder of young people by other young people who fit that middle-income demographic profile would command many more column inches. It is a disgrace and a damning indictment of our society that, increasingly, it is becoming immune to what is happening on our doorsteps. Our society is ignoring the issue, putting a whole generation of young people into a corner and saying, “That is what happens with those kinds of young people from those kinds of areas.” I want to make it very clear in this debate that the House of Commons recognises that no matter what their background—whether they grow up on an estate or in a comfortable neighbourhood—every single young life matters. We will not stand by while violence and fatalities continue to hit the next generation, because it is our future.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on securing a debate on this most important of issues. He gave a powerful and articulate speech. Last year, 188 people were killed with a knife and 119 sexual assaults took place at the point of a knife. Attempted murder and threats to kill involving a knife totalled over 2,100 incidents. It is no exaggeration to say that thousands of Britons, many of them young, have feared for their lives through stabbing.

When I was elected in May last year, I pledged to my constituents that I would do all I could to tackle to scourge of knife crime. Why? Colchester has seen too many young lives destroyed by crimes involving weapons. Jay Whiston, James Attfield and Nahid Almanea all lost their lives too early, and each case was a personal tragedy. Too many people, particularly our young people, still feel that it is acceptable to carry blades and knives. They wrongly believe that doing so will keep them safe. Let us be clear. Carrying a knife does not keep them safe; it is illegal and puts them and others in grave danger.

Bob Stewart: I believe that some people carry such weapons because they feel that doing so gives them status.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, and he is absolutely right. There are many reasons why young people carry blades. Sometimes it is to do with fear—that relates to his earlier point—and sometimes they are a status symbol. We have to hammer home the message that not only is it illegal to carry a knife, but a person is statistically far more likely to be the victim of a knife crime if they do so. We have to get that message out loud and clear.

I believe that the answer to youth violence is threefold, involving deterrence, education and intervention. In the interests of time, I will focus on the first two. I welcome the steps that the Government have taken, such as minimum custodial sentences for repeat knife possession and the commitment on police budgets. I agree with the hon. Member for Streatham on the need for education, which has a key role to play. We need to do far more to educate our young people about the dangers of carrying knives.

I have campaigned for some time with a local knife crime charity, Only Cowards Carry, which provides weapons awareness lessons in schools. The charity, which is based in north Essex in the Clacton area, was set up in 2012 by Caroline Shearer, whose 17-year-old son, Jay Whiston, was fatally stabbed that year. Since then Caroline, who is an inspirational woman, has campaigned to show the devastating impact of knife crime on young lives and families, and she has provided weapons awareness lessons in schools. Those hard-hitting lessons show young people the dangers of carrying knives and blades.

I have been to one and, trust me, they leave an impact. Young people the dangers of carrying knives and blade wounds on young people hit home very hard. We need to send out the message that all it takes is one moment of stupidity for lives and reputations to be shattered.
We teach our young people about internet safety, road safety and citizenship. There is a strong case for more schools to teach pupils about the danger of carrying knives. As I have found, Ministers regularly throw back the challenge that the demands on the curriculum are great. I accept that point, but, to be clear, I am talking about one 45-minute lesson in year 9 or year 10. That would not be a huge burden on the national curriculum.

Last summer, Caroline Shearer and I presented a petition with 50,000 signatures to Downing Street to call for charities such as Only Cowards Carry to go into schools to give those hard-hitting lessons to our young people. That would be a big step forward in tackling knife crime, not only in Colchester and north Essex, but across the country. The Government should take another hard look at encouraging more schools to introduce weapons education lessons.

According to the crime survey for England and Wales, violent crime is down since 2010, but according to violence against the person statistics recorded by the police, violent crime has increased. The picture is far from clear, and the reasons for spikes and falls in violent crime are not well understood. It is essential that the police, supported by good academic analysis, do the research to enable them to understand what is happening in our towns and cities.

There has been too much speculation about the causes, and we really need to focus on the facts. In Essex, more than half of the notable increase in recorded victim-based crime in the last 12 months—4,463 of 8,165 crimes—was in the “violence without injury” subcategory of violence against the person. That has traditionally covered harassment, shouting and very minor stone throwing, but the Home Office has decided that it should also include online bullying and harassment. That is nonsense, and it will really distort the debate.

I believe that there is a strong argument for a new stand-alone crime type category for recording online crimes. If those crimes continue to be placed in the category of violent crime, it will be difficult to debate violent crime and its specific causes. Of course, online bullying and harassment are extremely serious crimes, which sadly affect young people more than people in any other age groups. However, the steps we need to take to tackle physical violence and gang violence are different from those needed to tackle online abuse and harassment, so it is important to look at recategorisation.

In my constituency, victim-based crime is up by 821 offences on the year. Within that, violence is up by 681 offences. As I have just mentioned, a staggering 93% of those crimes are violence with no injury, and much of the total is made up of online bullying or harassment. That puts the rise in a very different light.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in relation to reported crime, particularly among young people, so much violent crime goes unreported?

Will Quince: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Lots of crimes up and down this country go unrecorded for all sorts of reasons. I very much support police forces, such as Essex police, that are making it easier for people to report crimes, particularly online. We must make it far easier for people to report crimes and give them the confidence that they will be followed up by the police.

To return to the point I was making—I apologise that it is a little detailed—it is really important to be able to base this debate on accurate statistics. It is almost impossible for us to have such a good, clear debate when the Home Office has provided such broad and unclear definitions of violent crime. Better categorisation is needed, including, as I have said, a separate category for online offences.

Another serious concern is to do with geography and location. In Essex, there is very clear evidence of increased violence related to gangs involved in the supply and distribution of class A and other drugs. The hon. Member for Streatham made the point about the clear link between gang or youth violence and class A drugs. Communities in Essex are consistently evolving, as they always have, with the movement of people from London. The sad reality is that some of the gang problems traditionally associated with areas of London are spreading to many, if not all, towns up and down the country, as my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh), who is no longer in his place, pointed out.

There have been a number of murders, often involving stabbings, where neither the victims nor those arrested and, in some cases, nor those convicted of the offences live in Essex. The London gangs are, without doubt, extending their county lines into Essex. Violent gang members have been using intimidation and violence, often against vulnerable people, to take over properties in towns such as Southend and Basildon, and even as far north as Colchester, to supply drugs to local dealers. This is not just about drugs, but about serious intimidation and threats against vulnerable people. We know what happens in London, and even outside London there is sometimes extreme sexual violence against women and girls who associate with such gangs.

It is essential that our police forces co-operate really closely on this issue. I am pleased that Essex police already co-operate well with the Metropolitan police, but it is extremely disappointing that, in 2016, most police forces still do not automatically share crime data and that they operate on different crime systems. I commend Essex for leading the way in having the first fully collaborative policing IT system, which will soon be used by nine forces. I am also pleased that the very recent report by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary on police effectiveness judged Essex police to be good at dealing with serious crime of this sort. Other forces quite simply must follow their lead in taking a more comprehensive approach and working more closely together.

To conclude, it is refreshing to hear a sense of cross-party consensus in the Chamber—not entirely around possible solutions, but certainly around a willingness to address this most important of issues. I very much support the call made by the hon. Member for Streatham for cross-party working on this issue. A fact-finding exercise to identify the root causes would be a sensible step. As I have mentioned, perhaps a little long-windedly, better categorisation is important so that we can get to the root causes and have a debate based on facts, rather than conjecture. Education, deterrence and intervention are also absolutely key to reducing violent crime and
serious youth violence. For many of our young people, delaying action to address this problem is simply not an option.

12.23 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on holding it. I know that, behind the scenes, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) has been quietly campaigning in the Tea Room for such a debate because of the concerns in her constituency. It is fantastic to be joined by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who has huge experience of these issues and has continually brought them, certainly during my years in Parliament, to the House’s attention.

This is where I start: the issue is not new. In a sense, it is very important not to have this debate as though this is a year zero moment. We have had this problem for several years. Problems with young people getting caught up in crime, particularly in urban and deprived areas, are absolutely not new. Those at home over Christmas who landed on the show “Dickensian”, an adaptation of many of Dickens’s books, and those very familiar with both “Great Expectations” and “Oliver Twist” will know that we had gangs in London. We had groups of young people getting up to criminality in London, and above such gang activity was usually the adult activity running the gangs, so these issues are not new. I was born in the period just after the huge public concern about mods and rockers congregating in different parts—

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Yes.

Mr Lammy: I notice that the Front-Bench Opposition spokesman is absolutely aware of that. She is ever so slightly older than me. At that time, there was real concern about gang activity in seaside areas or in urban areas of the country. The debate in this House about young people and crime and about gang activity is not new, so what is new? I think that the level of violence is new, the age profile is worrying and the geographic spread feels out of control.

On the age profile, the Met police says that its matrix—its central way of recording who is caught up in what it describes as gang activity—had a total of 3,459 individuals at the last time of publication in May 2014. There were 500 individuals under the age of 18: two 13-year-olds, 21 14-year-olds, 71 15-year-olds, 138 16-year-olds and 268 17-year-olds. There were also 356 18-year-olds, while 55% of the total were aged 18 to 22. Something is going on, and it is something we should be very worried about.

Any Members with significant housing estates in their constituency will talk about the arrival in this country of a phenomenon, which we often associate with America, of young people—teenagers—running drug activity on behalf of older individuals.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the serious violence against women and very young girls associated with gang-related activity is not presently recorded appropriately or understood, and that not enough action is being taken on that specific part of this important problem?

Mr Lammy: I am so pleased that my hon. Friend raises that issue, because that is the other factor that is new. I am about to come on to that.

The young age profile has something to do with the fact that enforcement on this national problem is working: the police are locking people up. We are serious about people carrying a knife and, historically, we have been serious about people carrying a gun. The police have locked up some of the older individuals, particularly after the 2011 riots, but all that has done is to drive the crime down to younger individuals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham made a point about the definition of gangs. It is very dangerous to call any congregation of young people a gang. It almost feels as though we call any congregation of young black and brown people a gang. Those of us in the House who have children, particularly children who are getting to their teenage years, know that, to a 12 or 13-year-old, joining a gang is quite attractive. We therefore need to be very careful about the definition of gangs.

Matthew Pennycook: My right hon. Friend rightly raises what happens when the police target older members of criminal gangs—I am talking about criminal gangs, not groups of young people—in operations. It leaves a vacuum that triggers a spike in violence among the younger, lower orders of the gangs, who have been drawn in for the very reasons he cites.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is completely right. What is unfortunately being said about the moral compass of these young people is incredibly worrying. They are impressionable; they are young. For reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham raised, when I say that they are impressionable, I am referring to the fact that we live in a society that has prioritised choice for the individual above everything else. We live in a society where people have the choice of whether to be exposed to quite serious violence on social media, on television and in parts, although not all, of the games industry. It is hard for modern parents, however much money they have, to distinguish between access to those images and that impression.

We therefore have young people stabbing others, almost as if they do not realise the consequences. It is quite, quite bizarre that someone might not realise that puncturing skin and causing blood loss might lead to a loss of life. I have seen images—they are on YouTube, so we can see them—of young people being stabbed continuously and it being almost like a pastime. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford is right that much of this goes completely unreported. It never turns up in our hospitals. It is solved by self-medication. People go to the pharmacy and get their band aid. It is sorted out in the community, so there is an indication that this violence is going down.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) raised something else that is new and worrying and that we would not associate, historically, with mods and rockers or Dickensian times: the phenomenon of women, including young women, being at the centre of the action. Again, as some of the older individuals who run the gangs have been locked up—actually, let us be clear that they can still run a gang from prison—they bring in the younger folk. Why? Young folk are less likely to get a sentence if they say that they are impressionable, I am referring to the impressionable; they are young. For reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham raised, when I say that they are impressionable, I am referring to the fact that we live in a society that has prioritised choice for the individual above everything else. We live in a society where people have the choice of whether to be exposed to quite serious violence on social media, on television and in parts, although not all, of the games industry. It is hard for modern parents, however much money they have, to distinguish between access to those images and that impression.

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are caught. They also bring in the women on the estates and prey on the young women. Historically, the Children's Commissioner has done tremendous work to raise issues such as the sexualisation of women and the way in which women become the victims of gang activity. Someone can hide the knife in their girlfriend's bedroom or hide their stash with her. She can walk quietly over to the opposite estate and perhaps not get detected or picked up in quite the same way, so the profile is changing.

**Mr Umunna:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way during his powerful speech. The issue is not just girls and women concealing weapons or being used to conceal weapons, but the straightforward exploitation of women in our communities, who are passed from one group of young lads to another. That just does not get talked about nearly enough in my view, as my fellow Lambeth MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), said.

**Mr Lammy:** Absolutely; there is a deeply disturbing pattern in the sexualisation of these women, and they are victims. That issue has not been picked up, as has been debated in other places.

All of this leads to a disturbing combination of violence, sexual activity, real victims, both young and female, and criminality in our areas. It is not just Members who are saying that. Dean Haydon, head of Scotland Yard's homicide and major crime command, said that the presence of 13 and 14-year-olds on the gangs matrix was concerning and warned of exploitation. It is very worrying that 17 men aged 18 or under were fatally stabbed in London just last year.

The Minister published a strategy in January 2016. I ask her as gently as I can, does this problem merit an eight-page strategy or something more considerable? At the back of the strategy in annex A, there is a list of the constituencies that are described as being “Ending Gang and Youth Violence areas”. The first question I have in relation to that is what we mean by “ending”. Are we really dedicated to ending this problem?

I have been in the House for 16 years and this story began around the time that I came here. In 1994 or '95, at about the time that Tony Blair became the leader of the Labour party and John Major was coming to the end of his leadership of the Conservative party, we would not have had a debate about youth violence and gangs. It just was not present in the British lexicon at that point in our history. Towards the end of the '90s, we started to see an upsurge in gun violence and Operation Trident began. I thought this was inappropriate, but it was termed black-on-black violence. That morphed into the strategies that we saw, particularly under Charles Clarke's leadership as Home Secretary, under the Tony Blair Government. After the riots under the coalition Government, there was also an upsurge.

Why am I talking about annex A? We have to decide whether we want to end this problem. I am afraid that it is going in the wrong direction. I have talked about the young people. I have talked about the women. I have talked about the violence. Other hon. Members have mentioned trauma. Let us look at the geography. In April 2012, the areas that were identified were places like Hackney, Haringey, Islington, Lewisham, Liverpool, Manchester, Nottingham and Sandwell. Hon. Members will not be surprised that those were the areas we wanted to deal with. By December 2012, it had moved on to include Hammersmith and Fulham, Merton and Leeds. When it got to Barnet, Bromley, Havering and Thanet, it started to get quite worrying. Last year, it included Basildon, Grimsby, Harrow, High Wycombe, Southampton and Swindon.

What is going on here? Something that was urban and inner-city has become incredibly suburban. Murders that were traditionally black have become white. It is reflecting on all our young people and they are being caught up in this violence. The picture is not unique to particular communities, but is spreading. There is a geographic spread.

I therefore come back to whether this problem is worth just an eight-page strategy of very anodyne statements:

“We will continue to prioritise the reduction of gang related violence including tackling knife crime.”

How? By when? Local areas are encouraged to continue to follow the approach of “bringing key partners together and developing an effective local response to gang violence.”

How? Who is going to do that? How do we know what is best practice? We have evidence that some of the gangs straddle different local authorities. There is real spread. Gangs in London—adults, actually—are running young people into the suburbs to sell drugs. How does the strategy in Lewisham or Haringey relate to the strategy in Kent? What is the pattern? That is not mentioned.

Apparently, the Ministry of Justice has brought together analysts “to examine the evidence base” and “ensure responses will be more coherent”, but how is that analysis being shared? Where do I get hold of it? How are we coming together to deal with it? It does not feel that there is enough of a grip on a spreading epidemic that is taking the lives of young people and inflicting real pain and hardship on differing communities. I believe that is why my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham secured today's debate.

What is required? We need much better understanding of best practice, and we have to get into the issue of violence in society. Any social worker or youth offending team worker will tell us that domestic violence is often going on in the homes of the people involved. We have the troubled families initiative, but what impact is it having on the problem that we are discussing, given that it seems to be getting worse? The statistics are worrying. The figures up to January 2016 show that there has been an 18% increase in assault with injury and a 22% increase in violence against the person in London. Data from the London ambulance service—we know that there are profound problems with its data, so they are not necessarily the best—show a 9% increase in assaults involving knives. Knife crime is up by 14% in London as a whole over the past 12 months. The situation is urgent, yet it is not figuring in our national conversation and responses in the way that it ought to.
After the 2011 riots, there was huge fanfare, because the Mayor of London, now the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)—he is obviously very good at fanfare—brought in Bill Bratton, the commissioner from New York. Hon. Members will remember that he had all the strategies and plans, but what happened to them? There has been some discussion of the model used in Glasgow, where there was a significant problem. What bearing does what Glasgow has done with its violence reduction unit have on the Government’s plans? We have also heard about what has gone on in Chicago and in Boston. The ideas to end the problem are out there, and there are solutions, but where is the coherent strategy to deal with it?

I am sorry to challenge the strategy document, but to people living in or representing one of the areas affected it feels like a civil service exercise, not the deliberate action that we will require. We particularly need not enforcement but diversion activities, especially for our very young souls.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the next speaker, may I say that we want to start the wind-ups at about half-past 1? We have three more Back-Bench speakers to go, so if they can keep to 10 or 15 minutes, everybody will get in.

12.43 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on introducing this important debate and on his powerful speech, which set out the challenges that we face. We have heard some extremely strong speeches, in which Members have made the point that this is not year zero. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) said, there is a crisis largely, but not exclusively, affecting black and minority ethnic populations and is one of deprivation.

It is a great shame that we do not have more Members of Parliament in the Chamber to discuss this subject, and I fear that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham is right that if the problem were not overlaid with that of deprivation, we would have more. It is critical that we exercise our duty as Members of Parliament to all our constituents, and that we echo the cries of pain that we hear in our communities by addressing the problem.

Because this is not year zero, we know that after a sharp increase in deaths from serious youth violence in London in 2007 and 2008, action was taken and the situation improved in the years to 2011 or 2012. The last debate that I secured on gangs and serious youth violence was in 2011, and after that time—I am not saying that the two facts were connected—there was genuine progress. Steps were taken, and there was a welcome reduction in the number of deaths in London. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have set out, that success is now being reversed, which is extremely worrying. As others have said, by no means all incidents are reported to the police.

Westminster North is not Lambeth, Haringey or one of the other areas usually associated with such pressures. It is certainly not south central Los Angeles. However, I will tell the House about some of the incidents that have happened there over the past couple of months. In January, just after the unfortunate removal of security cameras in Church Street in my constituency, a young man was stabbed in the street in front of witnesses. A constituent emailed me to say:

“This brutal and bloody event was shocking to witness and occurred immediately outside two shops that belong to”

the local trading association.

“I understand…that the victim is in surgery, and was lucky that a deep stab wound just missed his heart.”

Two days before Christmas, a young man I know well who did work experience in my office was surrounded by a group of 20 local young people and stabbed in the chest. The knife entered the fatty tissue of his heart, and he was extremely lucky to survive.

A few weeks earlier, a constituent who lives in my road emailed me to say:

“I was awoken by noises in the street outside and some desperate shouting. I got up and looked out of the window and saw a young lad on the phone, he was saying to someone on the other end; ‘I’ve been stabbed’.

I called 999—it took a long time for me to persuade them it was a real, serious incident. I understand that the boy had 4 stab wounds.”

That boy was 16 years old. In October, constituents reported violent clashes in St Mary’s Paddington Green and in Paddington recreation ground, tweeting at me:

“We desperately need police on patrol. The situation is out of control.”

They said that violence was rampant, with drugs and gangs, and tweeted:

“Huge gang fight behind Little Venice Sports Centre”.

That is a few weeks in Westminster North, which indicates how real the problem is.

It is true that, as my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, people can live in the communities affected and be completely oblivious to the situation. As a middle-aged woman, I can walk the same streets and live in a different world from the one in which our young people live in our cities, but increasingly also in some of our towns. Their experience of it is different, and the adult community needs to wake up to the challenges.

It is important to note that although most adults might be oblivious to every single one of those incidents, they have ripples, which spread out. The 20 young people who stabbed the young man who had done work experience in my office know what happened. Their families and relatives know the risks and dangers, and so do the family of that young man himself.

One of the most distressing things that I encounter is when I go into schools in my constituency and talk to eight or nine-year-old children and ask them how they feel about their community. One point they raise is gang violence. They ask whether it can be stopped, because they fear for their relatives.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. In my constituency, the youngest gang member is eight years old and the oldest is 61.
That shows the breadth of the problem in communities such as Brent Central. As she says, many people are oblivious to what happens on the streets.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend is right. We know the parents of those children who are injured or tragically murdered. They are in the community, in their churches and neighbourhoods, and their agony echoes throughout the community.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. My constituency is in mourning this week because, on Monday, a young, 11-year-old lad was the victim of a hit and run by young people in a vehicle. He was killed outside the mosque in front of his father, and the whole community is in mourning. As I have said before, often our young people do not understand the consequences of using weapons, and they feel that it is just part of being in a gang, or part of youth culture. That has serious consequences for the rest of their lives and for the whole community.

Ms Buck: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I do not want to go into the causes because they have been well set out and time is pressing, but she is right about the lack of understanding of the consequences of violent behaviour. A community group in my constituency ran a campaign called “fear and fashion”, which encapsulates the story perfectly. People are frightened, and “fashion” refers to people knowing that these things are going on in the community and considering them to be normal.

Every single incident, even non-fatal ones, is a tragedy that has ramifications and an impact on communities.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know, as a former member of the Home Affairs Committee, that the Committee conducted an inquiry into this—I think she was a member at the time. Given the comments of my hon. Friend, the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), is it not important to revisit some of the conclusions because some of the knowledge is already there and just needs to be revisited and acted on?

Ms Buck: My right hon. Friend is right. As we have heard, there are changes in the way in which gang and serious youth violence is working itself out, but constants remain, and we need to learn from that experience.

Some positive things are going on in the work that community organisations do. I do not often praise Westminster council, but I do when it deserves it, and it has a gangs unit that includes excellent staff, who work intensively with young people. Redthread community organisation works out of four accident and emergency units and tries to catch young people at what it describes as a “teachable moment”, when injury has been inflicted and young people can learn from it.

There is therefore much that is good, but I am going to break a little with consensus by saying how much we are in danger of losing at the very point when we need to gain. I am deeply worried about the crisis in our youth justice sector, and the more the overcrowding in our prisons and youth offending institutes, the more dangerous the situation becomes. That is at a time when we are spending £138,000 a year in Medway to keep a young person in one of those units. In Feltham, we are spending £69,000 a year. That is kind of money we spend to lock up a young person—obviously not only for gang and serious youth violence—but we are doing something dreadful: we are removing the investment that is necessary to prevent that behaviour.

I am horrified by my local council, which is not alone, because it is withdrawing all funding from its youth service. If we are talking about intervention and catching young people at a teachable moment, the youth service is critical. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham made a point about youth workers and the continuity and expertise that they provide in the community. They are critical and we are losing them.

Mr Umunna: My hon. Friend is making a very important point. So many activities that are provided for young people are not statutory. A lot of youth provision is not statutory, so it is often first in line for cuts. I am desperately trying not to be party political, but the 56% cut in the local government grant from central Government to our local authorities will inevitably have an impact on the support that local authorities can give to third sector organisations working on this matter.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend is right. We are in a dangerous situation as the pressure on youth services bites, because early intervention is so important. We often think of early intervention as being for the under-fives, but it is as important in the teenage and adolescent years as it is for under-fives.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. When I was the Minister for young citizens and youth engagement, it was our hope that such provision would be made statutory and that youth services would be ring-fenced in each council. It is disappointing that the Government have scrapped that and that we do not invest in all the youth services that have done an excellent job in communities for many years.

Ms Buck: I agree. However, it is not just youth services; there is also pressure on child and adolescent mental health services. For all the talk about giving mental health services parity, there has been an unprecedented squeeze in modern times on mental health services, particularly on CAMHS. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham made a point about mental health and I want to spend a minute or two on that. Westminster council—again, I praise it when it does good things—commissioned a report on gangs and mental ill health, a vastly unexplored subject that is important in understanding serious youth violence.

The report said: “Street gangs and associated serious violence have been a growing concern in the UK over the past decade and a specific concern in Westminster. They are concentrated in poor urban areas with high crime and multiple social problems. The mental health needs of young people in gangs have, until recently, been overlooked.”

The report demonstrated extremely high mental health need among those involved in gangs. Compared with non-violent men, gang members had increased rates of antisocial personality disorder—57 times higher than the average. Suicide attempts are 13 times higher, psychosis
sometimes from the home of a vulnerable person. 

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lines”, whereby urban, criminal gangs groom and coerce
subject. It is a privilege to follow the powerful contribution
which outlined the complexities and difficulties of the
important debate and for his excellent speech,

Ms Buck: I totally agree. We understand a great deal
about what is going on, even with a changing dynamic,
yet we are in danger of doing all the wrong things. We
are scrapping youth intervention in some places; we are
closing down the youth service in some places; we are
cutting CAMHS and so many other areas of early
intervention; and we are—fatally in my view—ensuring
that services that work for children and young people
who are at risk of gang involvement are short term and
end quickly. 

I believe two things. First, it takes a village to raise a
child. Those of us who live in the city, which is diverse,
mobile and disconnected, know that we have to build
and rebuild that village every single day. Voluntary
endeavour alone cannot do it: our village must include
neighbourhood police and the youth service, the national
health service, CAMHS and schools, as well as churches,
mosques, voluntary groups and individual families. Secondly, we should treat gangs and serious youth
violence as a public health emergency as much as a
criminal justice matter. Mental health services are on
the frontline of that battle.

12.58 pm

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend
the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) for securing
this important debate and for his excellent speech,
which outlined the complexities and difficulties of the
subject. It is a privilege to follow the powerful contribution
of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North
(Ms Buck).

I want to focus on the phenomenon of “county
lines”, whereby urban, criminal gangs groom and coerce
children and young people into selling class A drugs,
particularly heroin and crack cocaine. Young people
travel many miles from their home, often to quiet market
and seaside towns where they are set up to deal drugs,
sometimes from the home of a vulnerable person.

Last July, I attended the launch of the first major
report on county lines, entitled “Running the risks: the
links between gang involvement and young people going
missing”, which was published jointly by Catch22 and
Missing People. A month later, the National Crime
Agency produced an intelligence assessment that said
that county lines affect “most forces”, and almost always
involve the exploitation of vulnerable people. It said
that children are used
“as they are inexpensive, easily controlled and less likely to be
detected by police”.

In January, the Home Office published a report entitled
“Ending gang violence and exploitation”, which highlighted
the fact that gangs have wised up to police tactics and
are operating more covertly, making it harder for the
police to disrupt activity and safeguard vulnerable people.
The reports also state that young girls are groomed for
involvement in criminal behaviour and harmful sexual
behaviour as part of the gang culture. Indeed, the recent
Rotherham trial showed the connection between organised
crime and drugs, and child sexual exploitation.

We do not yet know the scale of the county lines
problem, and where it is discovered, agencies are not
clear how to deal with it. I have been told about children
from Greater Manchester who have been found selling
drugs in flats in seaside and other provincial towns,
including some as far away as Devon. Children are used
to reduce the risk to older gang members, and they may
go unnoticed by local police, particularly if they have
no record of offending. The gang leaders are rather like
modern-day Fagins or Bill Sikes—hard men who groom
youngsters and then use them to do their dirty work.

There is serious under-recognition of the county lines
phenomenon, which I believe is the next big grooming
scandal.

Just as with children groomed for child sexual
exploitation, we must recognise that young people drawn
into criminality and drug dealing have, in the first
instance, been groomed and manipulated. Those young
people end up being charged with criminal offences,
which gives them the same relationship with the law as
the adults who groomed them. That leaves them vulnerable
to further exploitation, and they continue to be victims
at the same time as offending. That must be seen in the
context of organised crime and the systematic grooming
of young people. Often, those at the centre are long-term
hardened criminals.

The Catch22 report stressed the link between gang
involvement and young people going missing, and said
that too often the young people are criminalised rather
than safeguarded. It said that, although missing incidents
for children and young people are generally under-reported,
that is particularly acute for those involved in gangs. It
presented evidence of gang-involved children and young
people being placed into care miles away from their
home town, with little care planning or support, leaving
them vulnerable to getting drawn back into gangs. An
additional issue with county lines is that the young
people involved may often be aged between 16 and 18.
According to the Children’s Society, there is evidence of
massive under-reporting of young people who go missing
in that age group.

Understanding of county lines is developing at a
national level, and the use of young vulnerable people
to traffic drugs across county lines is flagged up as a
major issue by practitioners. Organisations that work to
orders are available to the police to combat grooming
sell drugs at that early stage. Currently, numerous civil
the Minister a practical suggestion that would help to
disrupt involvement early after missing incidents. I offer
take an early intervention approach, and to try to
gang involvement, not only to understand trends, but to
and cross-referencing that with information about possible
Finally, we need to know how best to support those
older gang members with grooming younger members.
trafficking legislation and modern slavery laws to charge
need to know how much use is being made of anti-
National Crime Agency does not conduct county lines
parliamentary questions to try to establish numbers.
young people in county lines. I asked a number of
appropriate manner.
when young people are found they are supported in an
county lines, and how information should be shared
needed at national level to set out clearly where responsibility
arguments involve both trafficking and modern slavery.
These children are seen as “bad kids” who have
chosen a criminal lifestyle. For example, a national
newspaper recently reported a court case involving a
13-year-old Manchester boy who was sent to Barrow in
Cumbria by a criminal gang and set up as a heroin and
crack cocaine dealer. There was a quote saying that
police said the boy “revelled” in his role as a “little
gangster”. He was a child.
The recent Home Office report indicates that we still
have some way to go in tackling county lines. Action is
needed at national level to set out clearly where responsibility
lies within law enforcement for detecting and disrupting
county lines, and how information should be shared
with local authorities and safeguarding boards so that
when young people are found they are supported in an
appropriate manner.
We need to know the scale of involvement of vulnerable
young people in county lines. I asked a number of
parliamentary questions to try to establish numbers.
The Home Office Minister responded that, because the
National Crime Agency does not conduct county lines
operations, it does not hold that information. We also
need to know how much use is being made of anti-
trafficking legislation and modern slavery laws to charge
older gang members with grooming younger members.
Finally, we need to know how best to support those
young people once they have been found.
The police should be using data on missing episodes,
and cross-referencing that with information about possible
gang involvement, not only to understand trends, but to
take an early intervention approach, and to try to
disrupt involvement early after missing incidents. I offer
the Minister a practical suggestion that would help to
disrupt the grooming of children and young people to
sell drugs at that early stage. Currently, numerous civil
orders are available to the police to combat grooming
for child sexual exploitation, including sexual risk orders,
sexual harm prevention orders, and child abduction
warning notices. I would like similar orders to be created,
to be used where children are being groomed by organised
criminals and gangs to act as drug runners. Perhaps
they could be called “Fagin orders”.
Many children who are initially groomed into criminal
activity are often then groomed for sexual exploitation;
alternatively, they are initially groomed for child sexual
exploitation, and then for criminal purposes. The two
forms of exploitation are often inextricably linked, and
young people are reluctant and frightened to disclose
either. Return interviews with children who have gone
missing are an important source of establishing the risk
to the young person, and of gathering information
about their associates and intelligence about county
lines. It is important that that information is used for
safeguarding by police and children’s services.
When young people are found and arrested after
involvement in county lines, the approach from agencies
should be holistic. The St Giles Trust has suggested a
pilot in which their caseworkers—who are ex-offenders—
accompany police on targeted raids and immediately
offer support to the young people, who are more likely
to listen to those who have been in the same situation.
To conclude I will return to the point I made at the
beginning of my remarks: we must learn from the child
sexual exploitation scandals that have ruined so many
lives, and we cannot afford to make the same mistakes
again, blaming young people, saying that they have
made their own bed, failing to ask the right questions,
and failing to respond even when we know what is
going on. Missing People has been working with a
mother whose son started going missing aged 12 and
was being groomed by a gang to sell drugs away from
home in a county lines operation. The mother was
desperate not to lose her son to that, and always reported
it every time he went missing. It took her six months to
receive any support from services. How can that be
right? The boy repeatedly went missing for periods
ranging from overnight to up to three months. He ended
up being taken into care and had numerous
distance placements.
We need a response to county lines that ensures that
children are found, safeguarded and supported out of
gangs, and that the adults who groom and manipulate
them are punished to the full extent of the law. Until
then, it will continue to be the young victims who are
blamed and punished, as their abusers and puppet
masters continue with a trade that nets them thousands
of pounds a day.

1.9 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): As a
new MP, nothing can prepare you for receiving the call
from the police telling you that a teenager has been
murdered in your constituency. Once was hard enough,
but within weeks of each other, it happened twice on
exactly the same estate. In fact, since becoming an MP
last year, four young people from my constituency have
lost their lives due to the needless violence on our
streets: Shaquan, Naseem, Kabba and Jamar. I have sat
down with many of the family and friends left behind.
Many of them are here today. Losing loved ones is hard
enough. For them to have been murdered, and to not be
able to understand what has happened, is even harder.
I have been calling for a debate on this subject since October last year. I am therefore grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) for securing the debate, and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting it time.

There is so much we could talk about; there is so much that needs to be said—but we also need to listen. We can all stand here and give passionate speeches about gangs and youth violence, but the truth is that nothing will change. There is no speech that any one of us could give today that will stop our young people killing each other. That is the harsh reality, so what do we do? Do we accept that it happens and simply move on? No. Each one of us has an obligation to find solutions. I believe that they will come from building a stronger, more resilient community base for our country—one where we look out for each other.

Do we write another report, pull some words together and call it a policy? No. The Government need to realise that writing down 2,500 words, giving it the grand title of “Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation” and then calling it a policy simply will not work. There can be no more top-down solutions. Things have changed and we must listen and respond. There are some huge Departments looking at this: the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice and the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime in London. None of them can possibly understand the issues being faced by young people on a daily basis. They all engage with young people, but they do so in a tokenistic way. They do so to tick the box that says, “Must engage with young people.” They do not engage in a youth-led way; no, they do so in a “led youth” way. This whole approach needs to change.

Young people and our communities have the solutions, because they are the ones facing the problems. We need a far-reaching, youth-led consultation to really get to grips with the core issues that underpin the reasons for and the impact of the violence that is present in young people’s lives. This is not just about gangs. If we ask 10 people what a gang is, we will get 10 different answers. It is not just about youth violence, either. We need to drop the negative language. Young people are led up with constantly being portrayed negatively by politicians and the media.

Mr Lammy: On the point about what is a gang, is my hon. Friend surprised that in the Government’s document they have not even sought to define what they interpret to be a gang? Does she not think that that would help the conversation?

Vicky Foxcroft: I agree with everything my right hon. Friend says. As he said in his speech, the document is so brief that it barely defines anything or suggests what any of the solutions should be. We need to transform the debate fundamentally.

Bob Stewart: Further to the point made my friend, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), as I understand it these groups often call themselves gangs. That is part of the problem. It is therefore quite difficult to define.

Vicky Foxcroft: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but we tag people in certain ways too. We define groups of people as gangs, when they could just be groups of young people hanging about together. That is why we need to transform how we talk about the subject.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I belonged to a gang when I was younger. We had a uniform and a code—it was called the Girls’ Brigade. We have to be very clear when we are defining gangs. It is also our responsibility as MPs to work with everyone. I met my borough commander this week, and I do so every month so that we are all working together and, as my hon. Friend says, we are listening to young people to ensure that they are not criminalised or labelled from a very young age.

Vicky Foxcroft: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good and strong point. We need to talk about violence in our society. We need to forget age for a second. When someone—anyone—gets so angry they end up killing someone, we have failed as a society. We have failed the victim, failed the victim’s friends and failed the victim’s family. We have also failed the killer. What a life they must have led up to that moment when they pull out a knife and stick it into another human being.

What is our answer? What do we do to them? Police, court, prison—we lock them up for a minimum sentence of 25 years and then they are released. Then what? What kind of life have we provided for that person? We can picture the scene: dad out of work, mum an alcoholic; missed by social services, due to cuts; missed by youth workers, because they no longer exist; missed by the local police, because of cutbacks. We are creating a perfect storm. Youth work, cut; police, cut; social services, cut. What hope do we have while this Government are in power?

Shrinking the state—is that really the answer? Of course not. It is the very fabric of society that needs to be fixed in order to stop these events. I do not hold the Minister solely responsible. There is little that she can do on her own that would fix things. The problem is bigger than that. What do the Government do? They spend close to £1 billion on a citizenship scheme. They give it some clever branding and congratulate themselves on building a social movement. But what then? Once young people have completed the scheme, they are still in the same situation as before. The scheme is £1 billion of window dressing; £1 billion to change nothing. We do not need window dressing. We need to change fundamentally the way we approach society. We need to change the narrative. We need to talk about peace. We need to talk about community. We need to promote positive images of our young people. We need to give them a voice.

Running programmes for teenagers—well, that is nice, but it is not going to change much, not fundamentally. We need to start much younger. It is only when we change the lives of the youngest in society that we will see real change take place. Any psychologist or educationalist will say that. The younger we start to effect change, the sooner we can start to make change. So let us change things. Let us change the record, change the narrative, change the future.

This debate calls for a wide-ranging consultation focusing on serious youth violence. I am sure we can all get behind this. Let us do this together, because it is by working together that we will prevent young people from disappearing from our streets.
A couple of years ago, I was driving home when, around the corner from my home, I saw to my horror the body of a young man curled up on the pavement. I was intending to come on to Glasgow East later, but the project that took place there in 2008 was a response to the worst instance of gang violence that had ever occurred, which made Scotland, and particularly Glasgow, one of the worst places in western Europe for violence. The more than 600 gang members involved were presented with a choice—to use their experience to educate and train others, or face a zero-tolerance approach and possibly a prison sentence. Through this work and the ongoing commitment and support they received, remarkable results were witnessed. Violence was halved; weapon possession was down by 85%; and this group went on to establish a charity to create employment for other young people. So there are examples of where positive work can be done to reframe and re-approach the problem not just through legislation, but by working with young people to provide the support they require.

Angela Crawley (Glasgow East) (Ind): The east end of Glasgow was once almost a byword for gang violence. Significant work, education and a cohesive approach has reduced violent crime, gang membership and weapons possession. I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in congratulating the Scottish Government and the Violence Reduction Unit, who have done sterling work to reduce gang violence in Glasgow. Does she agree that Members across the House could learn some valuable lessons from the work that has been done in Glasgow over the past decade?

Angela Crawley: I thank my hon. Friend for her point. I was intending to come on to Glasgow East later, but the project that took place there in 2008 was a response to the worst instance of gang violence that had ever occurred, which made Scotland, and particularly Glasgow, one of the worst places in western Europe for violence. The more than 600 gang members involved were presented with a choice—to use their experience to educate and train others, or face a zero-tolerance approach and possibly a prison sentence. Through this work and the ongoing commitment and support they received, remarkable results were witnessed. Violence was halved; weapon possession was down by 85%; and this group went on to establish a charity to create employment for other young people. So there are examples of where positive work can be done to reframe and re-approach the problem not just through legislation, but by working with young people to provide the support they require.

Bob Stewart: What was actually done to reduce the violence there? What happened on the streets to reduce it?

Angela Crawley: There are a number of projects, but this particular one focused on bringing the young people in, engaging them and providing them with opportunities to go on to further education or training. They continued to be supported throughout that process so that they could reach sustainable employment and other routes outwith the confines of the environment in which they had grown up and themselves experienced violence or been party to it.

This Government must recognise that where legislation is proving ineffective, they must consider changing course. Lessons must be learned from where we have been successful. I share the sentiments of the hon. Member for Streatham that young people have been given a bad name in this discussion and that more often than not we tarnish them with this reputation that makes them the perpetrators, without seeking to address the root causes of the problem, which many Members of all parties have addressed in their speeches.

I have listened to Members who have spoken of their constituents’ experience of violence and its impact on their lives, and of heart-breaking accounts from loved ones of lost years and lost lives. The hon. Member for Streatham spoke about the level of violence in London, but as has been repeated in the debate, the problem is not unique to one particular area or one particular city, so we must do more to address the problem as a matter of policy. Factors such as poverty, violence and drugs, and the rising incidence of violence against women in ghettos must be looked at in a far more holistic way to address some of those root problems.

Let me acknowledge that it was only 10 years ago, as I mentioned earlier, that Glasgow was named the murder capital of western Europe—something that the then Scottish Executive could not ignore. Despite the number of convictions, there remained a need to tackle the root of these serious problems. Scotland has been successful in reducing the number of incidents. The campaign “No Knives Better Lives” raises awareness and seeks to educate young people about the consequences of knife crime. This is one example of a measure that has contributed to success in reducing violence.

In my constituency in south Lanarkshire, a local community group established a drama workshop known as “The Street”, which has a real-life setting. It is produced by young people, many of whom have been involved in violence themselves, and it tackles issues of violence, knife crime and drug and alcohol abuse, as well as sexual violence. This message can be delivered by young people to young people in a hard-hitting way with a powerful impact, addressing the serious ramifications and consequences of actions occurring on a daily basis on the streets.

Under the stewardship of the former Scottish Justice Secretary, Kenny MacAskill, we focussed on early intervention, improving life chances and the integration of the police within the community, working with young people. This resulted in a significant reduction of crime and violence. Let me declare that the incidence of violence continues on a daily basis, but we must continue to tackle these issues, which I hope the Government will take into consideration.
Some in my community live every day with the pain and worry that results from knife crime and gang violence. They worry about their children’s safety and they have been robbed of a basic sense of security. They want—they need—weapons off our streets and they want their children to be safe.

I am therefore disturbed by the recent rise in recorded knife crime—up 9% in England and Wales last year after a long downwards trend. If we look at the numbers in more detail, we find that rapes involving a knife are up by 26%; threats to kill by 20%; and attempted murder by 24%. Gun crime is up by 4%. Those numbers are absolutely chilling.

I know that we need to treat recorded crime numbers with caution. The police should not be discouraged from improving the reporting or the recording of crime, which can explain such fluctuations, but sadly there is evidence that the increase in recorded knife crime simply reflects an increase in criminal activity using knives. For example, data from the London Ambulance Service shows a 9% rise in incidents resulting from assaults involving a knife.

There is some evidence to show that the rise in knife crime is related to an increase in the number of gangs. Recent Home Office research suggests a sharp rise in the number of gangs in the capital, and the number of offences that the Metropolitan police associates with gang activity has increased by 25% in the last three years. There are 225 recognised gangs in London, with around 3,600 gang members. In a large city, that is a relatively small number people, but they still account for 17% of serious violence in the capital.

Given those numbers, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) is quite right to draw this issue to our attention and to call for a debate this afternoon. There have been some stonkingly good speeches, and I want to pay tribute to all colleagues who have contributed to such a good debate.

I am aware that a number of police services have chosen to focus significant resources and activity on dealing with the scourge of knife crime. Last week, I visited Bedfordshire police to discover how they had managed to cut knife crime by 21%. Officers from Bedfordshire’s Operation Boson told me that they had adopted best practice from across the country, and tried to attack knife crime relentlessly from every angle. They believe that they have reduced the number of knives on their streets through “secret shopper” inspections and by carefully deployed “surrender bins”, unannounced “knife arches” and the judicious use of stop and search powers. They have also supported diversion schemes in partnership with the likes of Luton Town football club, which are aimed at offering alternative ways in which young people can deploy their abundance of skills and energy.

Bedfordshire’s magnificent performance has been done on a shoestring. The excellent police and crime commissioner Olly Martins told me that balancing all the demands of the service with ever-decreasing funding and resources was like trying to balance spinning plates, always worried that something would come unstuck. It is clearly a testament to his skill and determination and to the commitment and professionalism of serving police officers in Bedfordshire, particularly those in Operation Boson, that Bedfordshire police have been so successful in their assault on knife crime.

However, in the case of much crime, prevention is always better than cure, and I know that some first-class work is already being done throughout the country to try to prevent crimes of this nature from happening. If the House will forgive me, I shall give a parochial plug to the “Carry A Basketball Not A Blade” initiative, which is run by Newham All Star Sports Academy. That charity was started in tragic circumstances by Anthony Okereafor after two of his friends were lost through knife crime. Anthony helps young people by harnessing the power of sport to provide a counter-narrative to the poisonous idea that gang life is in some way glamorous. It is the sort of “peer-to-peer prevention service” that I think works incredibly well, and the Home Affairs Committee thinks that it should be “expanded” and “commissioned more consistently” across the country.

Dawn Butler: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. In the context of prevention, may I thank the Reverend Rose Hudson-Wilkin, who is in the Chamber today, for all the work she has done in Hackney, where she has comforted so many families who have experienced violent crime?

Lyn Brown: Absolutely. People of that kind, with commitment of that kind and programmes of that kind, require our support. They require staff who have expertise and the trust of their communities, but they are also seriously in need of investment. Last month, however, we discovered that the Home Office was pulling the plug on funding for the ending gang and youth violence peer review network, a practical programme that brings together academics, local government officials and the police to develop and share knowledge and best practice with the aim of reducing gang violence. The Government’s last annual report on the network described it as “successful” and “low cost and high impact”, so why is its funding being cut?

Two weeks after news of the cut was leaked to The Guardian, we were told by the Minister that the network would be replaced by a new “forum”. The network had the resources that were necessary to establish and share best practice; will the new “forum” be equally well resourced, or will its funding be reduced?

I should be very grateful if the Minister answered some of those questions. I can tell her that Deborah and George Kinsella, the parents of the murdered teenager Ben Kinsella, said:

“We are extremely disappointed to hear that the government is making further cuts to funding to tackle serious youth violence when there are so many of us trying to make things better for others after losing our own children.”

June Addai, the grandmother of 17-year-old Marcel, who was murdered by a gang on a Hoxton housing estate, said:

“The government seem to be cutting everything. Children have nowhere to go, they need clubs to go to rather than hanging out on the streets where they can get into trouble. They get left behind.”

Knife crime is beginning to creep up, and it is an undeniable truth that that is happening after five years of deep cuts in spending on youth clubs and crime prevention. There will be naysayers who will claim that the increase in knife crime has nothing to do with the
cuts, and that is why I fully support my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham’s call for an all-party commission. We need to get to the bottom of why youth violence is on the increase, so that we can begin to turn the tide. I ask the Minister, who is not a bad woman, “Can we have an all-party commission—please?”

1.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): Goodness me! I do not think that the shadow Minister has ever been quite so nice to me across the Dispatch Box, although I am sure that that will not be repeated. I am speechless, but the hon. Lady will be glad to know that I will not be speechless for long.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on securing this important debate. It could not take place on a previous occasion owing to time restrictions—a number of urgent questions were granted, which ate into the time—and the fact that the hon. Gentleman has initiated it again today demonstrates his perseverance and his determination to draw attention to this issue. His long-standing interest in tackling gangs and youth violence is well known, and I congratulate him.

I also congratulate the other Members who took part in the debate: we have heard some powerful contributions, which featured the in-depth local knowledge that is key to tackling the issue.

Let me begin by assuring the House that tackling gangs and serious youth violence is a priority for the Government. I have met and spent time with victims of such violence, and I am aware of the devastating impact that it can have on families, communities, and young people whose lives were ahead of them, but may not be so nice to me across the Dispatch Box, although I am sure that that will not be repeated. I am speechless, but the hon. Lady will be glad to know that I will not be speechless for long.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) on securing this important debate. It could not take place on a previous occasion owing to time restrictions—a number of urgent questions were granted, which ate into the time—and the fact that the hon. Gentleman has initiated it again today demonstrates his perseverance and his determination to draw attention to this issue. His long-standing interest in tackling gangs and youth violence is well known, and I congratulate him.

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We have heard many references to the Government’s approach. If the House will allow me, I shall spend a few minutes talking about what we have done, and what the future holds.

The Government published their refreshed approach to tackling gangs in a paper—it was only a paper; I shall return to that point shortly—entitled “Ending gang violence and exploitation”. It explains that the Government’s approach is focused on both reducing violence, including knife crime, and preventing the exploitation of vulnerable individuals by gangs. It builds on the ending gang and youth violence programme that we established in 2012, at a time when many people were only just starting to understand the problems caused by gangs in their areas. The EGYV programme dealt with the need to understand those problems, and to build local resilience. It was due to end in March last year, but because we were beginning to see gangs operating in new ways, and, in particular, the exploitation of vulnerable young people, we extended it for a further 12 months so that we could identify where gangs were operating, and could help local areas to build that resilience.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I am not sure whether this tallies with what the Minister has just said, but the Government announced in January that they would extend the programme to nine new areas, including Great Grimsby. That came as a surprise to me, because I had not known that our area contained gangs of the nature that has been described by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna). A subsequent conversation with my local police and crime commissioner indicated that the programme might be along the lines of what the hon. Member for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh) mentioned earlier, and might be more concerned with serious organised crime. What criteria were used to decide on the towns that were included in the programme?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady makes some important points. The original programme’s work, which included the peer review network, is now complete. Local resilience has been built, and local areas have had that peer review. We have now passed the stage of understanding, and need to proceed to delivery, which is the reason for the new programme. The new areas are areas where, as part of the peer review, we identified possible problems. We spoke to local authorities and local police chiefs to find out whether they wanted to be part of the new programme, which is intended to help local areas to understand the problems and the way in which best practice might work, and to give them the support that they need.

Several hon. Members rose—

Karen Bradley: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who is my Member of Parliament in London.

Ms Buck: I am happy to oblige with any casework.

The Minister mentions the partnerships that are being built. Does she think that the local authorities that have withdrawn all the resources for the youth service will be able to enter into such partnerships?

Karen Bradley: It is for local areas to determine what works best for them, but the Home Office can help them with resources and best practice from the centre.

Mr Umunna: It is good to see the Minister responding on behalf of the Government. May I make two points?

I do not accept that the work of the peer review network is done, because the nature of what is going on is changing. The programme started in 2012, since when the extent to which social media are used by, for example, the groups of young people who are perpetrating these acts has become much greater, and, as I said in my speech, the nature of the groups has changed. My second point is that the peer review network appears to have been replaced by two civil servants manning a mailbox. I really hope that that is not the case, but that is what I have been told by insiders. This is why I am so concerned about its being disbanded.

Karen Bradley: I want to assure the hon. Gentleman that that is not the case. I spoke at an event earlier this week to try to get more involvement in the forum that we are establishing, and I will say more about that in a moment. I would like to extend an invitation to him to meet me, because there are many things that we need to discuss and we simply do not have time to do that today.
Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): On the important point about liaison with local police forces and local authorities, may I thank the Minister for the work that she and her officials have done in relation to the horrific knife crimes in Chelmsford over the past 18 months, and for the way in which her Department, led by her, has been willing to liaise with Essex police to see what more can be done to overcome this problem in our community?

Karen Bradley: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I know that he wanted to take part in this debate, but he has been involved in an important Bill Committee. I thank him for being here now and for the work that he does in Chelmsford. He is right to suggest that the work of Essex police, supported by the Home Office, has played an important part in tackling the issue of “county lines”, which my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) also raised.

Lyn Brown: Seeing as I have been so nice to the Minister today, I would be very grateful if she would extend that courtesy and invite me to the meetings that she is going to have on these issues.

Karen Bradley: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady and—I am probably going to regret this; my officials will certainly regret it—I extend that offer to any Member who wants to come and talk about what is happening in their local area. I am more than happy to spend time with Members to help them build local resilience. As the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) said, this is about local solutions. This is not top-down; it is not about the Government imposing anything.

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet with me, but part of the problem is about having the funding to enable us to deliver those local solutions.

Karen Bradley: I will come on to funding shortly. I am trying to be non-party political, but I might have to make some comments shortly if I am not allowed to continue in that vein. However, I am trying to be non-partisan and I want to work with hon. Members from across the House. I know that they are facing this problem in their communities and I want to ensure that the Home Office extends whatever support we can in order to get a local solution that is right for their area. That will not be a top-down solution, however, and it will not be one size fits all.

Mr Lammy: If we have had the peer review stage and we know what works, will the Minister tell us more about what works and where that information is published? Why does she think that the figures are getting worse?

Karen Bradley: I recently visited the A&E department at King’s College hospital in the constituency of the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). It is absolutely tragic that the first opportunity we get to have a teachable moment with these young people is when they turn up at A&E. They are turning up not in an ambulance—the gangs do not phone an ambulance or any other blue light service—but in private cars and being dumped at A&E, and that is the first opportunity that any agency has to make contact with them.

I want to pay tribute to Redthread, which provides young people’s advocates at A&E departments across London. Those advocates are important in making contact not only with the young person who has been the victim of an attack but with their family when they come to visit. They pay an important part in keeping that young person in hospital and getting them to speak to someone they trust. That might be the first opportunity we have to speak to them, and we need to find a way of making that happen sooner. This is about education, about working with schools and about working in vulnerable locations. When I talk about the revised programme, I will mention some of the approaches that we are using in that regard. I want all those hidden crimes that are not being recorded at the moment to be reported and recorded so that we can understand what the problem is.

Karen Bradley: I agree that there are many opportunities for intervention. My frustration is that those opportunities are not taken until the young person is found in A&E. I hope the hon. Lady shares that frustration. I pay tribute to her council in Brent. I met her council leader recently and learned about the partnership working that the council is doing to understand the problem. It was a peer review that assisted in understanding the problem, but now this is about local delivery.

The hon. Lady is right to say that this is about poverty. People in Brent talked to me about the housing estates and the work that they are doing in South Kilburn, which neighbours the Paddington recreation ground, with whose football pitches I have to say I am familiar. They are doing incredibly important work on the South Kilburn estate to transform it into a place to live where gangs will not be allowed to flourish. I pay tribute to Brent and to the many other local authorities around the country that are working hard in this regard. I hope that many others will be able to take advantage of this programme through the support that the Home Office provides.

I want to make some progress now, so that we can get on to the important Welsh affairs debate. First, however, I will just mention that although I understand that the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) is
concerned about an eight-page Government document, this might be the first time that anyone has ever told me that a Government document is too short. We are usually accused of producing too much with too little substance underneath it. The “Ending gang violence and exploitation” document has been widely welcomed. We worked with many organisations and stakeholders to develop this approach. The paper sets out the high-level approach, but incredible amounts of work have gone on underneath that. It has been welcomed by many organisations including Safer London, the Met police and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) asked why certain areas were involved in the programme. The answer is that those areas have said that they want to be part of it. They want to know what learning is available and to understand the partnership working. For example, they want to learn about working and sharing information with A&E departments. It is vital that we get that information as quickly as possible and share it with different agencies. I also take the point about the definition of a gang. The definition for gang injunction purposes is set out in the Serious Crime Act 2015. That is why there is no separate definition; it is a known definition that has already been set out in legislation.

So, what does our new programme involve? There are six priorities, based on the fact that gangs are operating in different, more covert ways. That is why our first priority is “county lines”, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Members for Yeovil (Marcus Fysh) and for Colchester. The hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey)—I think I shall refer to her as my hon. Friend, if she does not mind—also referred to that in her speech. It is important that we help the most vulnerable people in our society who are being exploited by urban street gangs to run drugs and to do many other things, and I am enormously supportive of the missing persons charities and of her work on the all-party parliamentary group on runaway and missing children and adults. That work is vital in helping to find those young people and getting information about what happens to them when they go missing and who is influencing them. She was right to talk about trafficking and modern slavery; this is very much modern slavery and these are trafficking offences. I hope the prosecution services and others will use those modern slavery offences, where appropriate, to get convictions, because I want us to get convictions and stop this happening. If the best and most likely way to get the conviction is by using modern slavery offences, I am all for that and it is what we should do.

The second priority in the programme is protecting vulnerable locations, which again links to the point about missing people and “county lines”. We need to get to the places where vulnerable young people are being targeted—pupil referral units and residential children’s care homes. These are places where young people who are very vulnerable to exploitation find themselves. On the point about young offenders institutes, these are vulnerable locations and, as hon. Members will know, the Ministry of Justice has asked Charlie Taylor to lead a review of this matter. I want to see the results of that review. I also want to make sure that we understand and that Tenders institutions understand that those vulnerable young people are being exploited, and that they take action to stop that happening.

The third priority is reducing violence, including knife crime. I have listened to many of the contributions about knife crime and I agree that we do not want to see knives on our streets. There are many offences and measures that police, trading standards and local authorities can use, but we are looking carefully at what else we can do to make sure the authorities have all the weapons they need to take knives off our streets. I was at a conference last week hosted by the Metropolitan police at New Scotland Yard with retailers, making sure that they understand their role in a responsible society in ensuring that knives do not hit our streets.

The fourth priority is safeguarding gang-associated women and girls, which has been mentioned by many Members, including the hon. Members for Dulwich and West Norwood and for Streatham, and the right hon. Member for Tottenham. The very idea that girls think that it is acceptable to be exploited in a line-up by various gang members and that this is something they should do is absolutely wrong. I am pleased that the Government—I hope that hon. Members noticed this announcement earlier this week—have committed £400,000 to young people’s advocates to work with all young people, but specifically targeting girls and young women, so that they do not just mean a windy church hall. These have to be meaningful alternatives to gangs, so that young people do not feel that gangs are the only place they can go.

Our fifth priority is to promote early intervention, a point raised by many Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester talked about how we have to get in early and educate young people. Finally, our sixth priority is providing meaningful alternatives, and the hon. Member for Streatham made the point on that clearly. We need to show young people alternatives, and he rightly says that that does not just mean a windy church hall. These have to be meaningful alternatives to gangs, so that young people do not feel that gang is the only place they can go.

I want to touch on some of the specific points that were raised. I am looking forward to discussing the independent commission with the hon. Gentleman. I am not convinced at this stage that a national independent all-party commission is the best way to approach this. We need to get into delivery and make sure that the programme is allowed to deliver. I know that local commissions are being set up. I met the West Midlands police and crime commissioner yesterday, and he is setting up his own local commission. I encourage hon. Members to do that work locally. I hesitate to establish a national commission because, as we have all said, there are different considerations to take into account and different things are going on. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford made the point that local young people and local communities need to be part of this. I would encourage local work and local commissions, where appropriate, but I am not convinced that this is the right time for a national commission. I am, however, looking forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman. May I also ask to meet my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport to discuss her interesting suggestion about Fagin orders? Civil orders have been successful. They are used when we do not have enough evidence for a criminal procedure, and I would be very interested in talking to her about that.

There are many more things I could say and many more points I could make, but I am conscious of the time so I will conclude by repeating my thanks and
congratulations to the hon. Member for Streatham on securing the debate. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to it. I wish to finish by assuring everyone that the Government and I regard this issue as incredibly important. It is a continuing priority, and we will continue to work with national and local partners to address these issues.

1.55 pm

Mr Umunna: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall speak for a couple of minutes to reflect on the debate. First, I wish to thank all hon. Members who have participated in a fantastic debate, which has done great credit to our House. It sends a message to those watching that the House of Commons takes this matter seriously. Secondly, what has been so interesting in the debate is that a lot of the points made have been ones that have not been made before. For example, I am thinking of the point made by the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) about data collection. I could also mention the good points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Lammy), and my hon. Friends the Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck), for Stockport (Ann Coffey), for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), among others.

I heard the Minister say that she was not convinced at the moment of the need for a national commission, but I am pleased that she has not ruled it out. I agree with her that it would be useful if localities set up their own commissions, and we have already done that in Lambeth. I think it would be useful to have a national commission, because we could share best practice and see what is happening as the situation changes on the ground. That was one thing we tried to do through the London gangs forum, when it was operating—as I said, however, we should not use the term “gang” any more. Not only does having a national commission say that we take this seriously, just as we have commissions in respect of other issues, but it would be very useful in sharing best practice from around the country.

As I said, this has been a wonderful debate and I think that we will all want to reassure those watching that this is not the end of the matter. It is very much the start of this campaign by this Parliament, and we will not rest until we see an end to the violence on our streets, and the opportunities and horizons widened for our young people, who are, as I said, our future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House calls on the Government to establish an independent, all-party commission, involving a wide-ranging consultation, to identify the root causes, effect of, and solutions to, serious youth violence, including knife crime, its links to gang culture and the sale of illegal drugs.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am amazed to see that the Secretary of State for Wales is not in his place to respond to our next debate today, despite the fact that he made an extremely important announcement about fundamental changes to the draft Wales Bill on Monday, to journalists and not to this House, with the Wales Office tweeting at the time that hon. Members could wait until today to debate these changes. Have you been made aware that the Secretary of State plans to attend today’s debate to answer the important questions that Members have for him?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): As the hon. Lady knows well, Mr Speaker, or the occupant of the Chair, has no authority to require Ministers to be here for a debate such as this. Mr Speaker has said on many occasions, and I agree with him, that it is very important that this House of Commons is the body that holds Ministers to account and that speeches and announcements ought to be made here. I am not aware of what the Secretary of State said on Monday or of what he is doing today, but I am aware that a very capable Minister is here at the Dispatch Box. On behalf of the House, I trust that he will answer the questions that the hon. Lady and other colleagues will undoubtedly put to him and will draw to the attention of the Secretary of State anything that ought to be drawn to his attention, which will indeed be the whole debate. Mr Speaker has made it very clear, and I reiterate this, that Ministers making announcements should make them in this House and not anywhere else.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am concerned about not only the Secretary of State’s absence from this important debate, but the fact that he was absent at a St David’s day reception hosted in Lancaster House earlier today. Perhaps he has died or perhaps he has resigned and not told the House. Perhaps you could shed some light on this.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The Chair definitely has no responsibility whatsoever for receptions held outside this House.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I can advise the House that the Secretary of State has parliamentary business elsewhere and I understand that he has spoken to the promoter of the debate to explain that this is the case. I should also say that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State hosted a very successful St David’s day reception on St David’s day at No. 10 earlier this week.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We will have no further discussion of this matter, as it is not my responsibility to explain where the Secretary of State is. The Minister has given an explanation and that is the end to the matter.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Is it a different point of order?

Ian C. Lucas: It specifically concerns a communication from the Wales Office. On Monday, when the Secretary of State made a closed announcement to journalists, I tweeted that I was surprised that the matter was not being made in a statement to the House of Commons. In response to that tweet, I received from the Wales
Office a communication saying that I would be able to raise such matters with the Secretary of State in this debate today. It seems that it is entirely inappropriate for the Wales Office to communicate in that way—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. That is the same point of order. If the Secretary of State decides that the Minister should answer these questions today and respond to the points, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman will in due course make, then that is up to the Secretary of State and the Minister. Now we will continue with the debate.
The British economy benefits to the tune of £227 billion a year in the exports that it makes to the European Union, thanks to its membership of the single market. If we are looking for value for money, £9 billion to £227 billion looks like a pretty good deal to me.

More immediately, many share my concerns about the months between now and 23 June and ask whether it is realistic to expect rational decisions to be made around a Cabinet table that is beset by mutual loathing.

Hundreds of thousands of Welsh jobs are linked to EU membership, and that membership is our largest source of investment, bringing growth, quality employment and higher wages. Much of our global investment from outside the EU is made possible by the fact that, inside the EU, we provide a gateway to the single market. That is a major reason for international firms such as Tata Steel in my constituency to locate in Wales.

As Members will be aware, the Welsh steel industry finds itself in a precarious position and nowhere in Wales is that felt more acutely than in my constituency. The works in Port Talbot are the productive core of our local economy and community, so the announcement at the start of the year of 750 job losses was a bitter blow, which will be compounded when the impact starts to be felt through the supply chain and the wider local economy.

Although the steel crisis may be partly the result of global trends and events, what cannot be ignored is that the Government have been asleep at the wheel for the past five years. Far more could and should have been done to give the British steel industry a fighting chance. From the blatantly unfair and distortive dumping of Chinese steel to the incompetent and complacent management of public procurement, this Government have failed to give justified support or stimulus to steel.

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. May I draw his mind back to the evidence that we took from management and the unions about those terrible job losses? Both said that the European Union had delayed bringing in tariffs on Chinese rebar and had taken a very long time to agree the compensation package—for which the Government had to ask permission from the EU—in order to give back to companies such as Tata some of the money that had already been taken as a result of energy taxes.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Membership of the European Union is defined by how a country engages and how it works with partners in Brussels—both with the European Commission and the other member states. What we have is a Government who, in 2011, recognised that there should be an energy-intensive industries compensation package, but then failed to knock on the door in Brussels and make it happen. How can it be that it took five years to deliver that deal?

When it comes to the dumping of steel, the British Government are the ringleader of a set of member states that do not want to reform the anti-dumping rules—so we still have the lesser duty rule—and are cheerleaders for China, lobbying for it to have market economy status. I am afraid that we need to draw a line under this constant scapegoating of Brussels. The blame should be laid squarely at the doors of Nos. 10 and 11 Downing Street and the rest of the Cabinet. Unlike other member states, they have failed to engage in Brussels in a way that wins for British business.

The Government operate in a fog of laissez-faire ideology. They pray to the gods of the free market, and then they hope for the best. In reality, the market economy function effectively only if it is regulated. Just as football requires the off-side rule to ensure fair competition, so our steel industry requires the right regulatory framework, so that it can trade in equitable conditions—on a level playing field. Instead, the Government’s blithe faith in the free market is driving them to lobby for China to be given market economy status, and to refuse to support the scrapping of the lesser duty rule.

I wish to state now, with utmost gravity, that if speedy action is not taken to prevent the dumping of Chinese steel, we will witness the beginning of the end of UK steel making. The Government know full well that this foundation industry is hanging by a thread. Neither free market dogma nor cosying up to Beijing should be allowed to impede their patriotic duty to emulate other EU countries and stand up for the men and women who are the backbone of the British economy.

The Minister for Enterprise and the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills recently visited my constituency, and I hope they will return so that they can go to the homes of some of my constituents who have lost their jobs. I hope they will look those men, women and families in the eye and explain themselves—explain how they can claim publicly that they are supporting the steel industry, while fighting tooth and nail behind closed doors against the lifting of the lesser duty rule and for market economy status for China.

I hope those Ministers will explain how they can claim publicly that they are changing public procurement to maximise the use of British steel, while allowing the Ministry of Defence to build the latest flotilla of Royal Navy frigates with Swedish steel. I hope they will come to Aberavon and explain the breath-taking contrast between their words and their deeds, for the people of my constituency deserve an explanation.

I am certain that the British steel industry has a promising future if it is given the right support by Government. The men and women at the Port Talbot works make the finest steel that money can buy and they are breaking all production and efficiency records, but the industry requires a long-term industrial strategy based on a sustained, comprehensive approach to skills, investment, regulation, energy and industrial relations. That is why I am proud to co-chair a working group of the all-party parliamentary group on steel, which will produce a report, “Steel 2020”, on formulating a long-term industrial strategy for British and Welsh steel.

Our strategy for the future of the Welsh economy must not be limited to steel. We need a new industrial revolution grounded in the new economy of renewables and connected technology, a fourth industrial revolution such as the one that was spoken of at the recent meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos. I see Wales at the forefront of that revolution. The Swansea Bay tidal lagoon could transform the energy industry, but frustratingly, its future is under threat owing to the Government’s perpetual flip-flopping. A positive decision
on the lagoon would not only put a much needed tick in
the Government’s ever-diminishing green credentials,
but deliver a massive boost to the local economy. By
committing to sourcing as much steel as possible from
the UK, it would significantly help the UK steel industry.
That project needs and deserves rapid advance. The
Government need to get off the fence, and fast.

The Government’s short-sightedness is undermining
other forms of renewable energy, such as wind and
solar. These are burgeoning industries in my constituency,
with hundreds of jobs at stake, but they are under threat
because of the Government’s moves to cut price stabilisation
mechanisms, such as the feed-in tariffs. The Government
have been on a policy descent from “Hug a huskie” to,
in the words of the Prime Minister, “Let’s cut the green
crap”.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): May I point
out the hypocrisy in what the hon. Gentleman is saying?
There is a contradiction between supporting steel—Celsa
Steel, for example—which uses so much electricity, and
putting a price on that electricity for renewables?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his
intervention. As we have discussed, it is clear that
energy-intensive industries require support from
Government. That was recognised by the Chancellor in
2011. The support that has come, finally, is welcome.
The big question for me is how it could possibly have
taken five years to make that happen—to get the state
aid clearance that was required from the European
Union. Fundamentally, the strategy for energy must be
about spreading the burden of the cost more effectively
so that our energy-intensive industries are not being
hung out to dry by an energy policy that does not make
sense. It is also about making a firm commitment so
that those investing have a sense of the stability and
sustainability of the market in future. We currently do
not have any of those things in place, which is why we
are in such a mess.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): My hon. Friend
makes an important point about stability. Does he agree
that the real problem in industries such as solar and
anaerobic digestion—which is what is happening in my
constituency—is the instability of the legislative and regulatory
framework, which is a deterrent to long-term investment and is costing a large number
of jobs in communities right across Wales?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree absolutely. The Energy and
Climate Change Committee has just produced a compelling
report that clearly demonstrates that we are losing
investment and jobs precisely because of the mixed
messages and signals that this Government send to
investors. Business abhors a vacuum. Business needs
stability. It needs to know whether there will be a return
on its investments, and at present it sees no evidence
whatever of that in the United Kingdom.

Wales, and south-west Wales in particular, can also
be at the forefront of an internet revolution. Swansea
Bay city region has based its city deal proposal on the
concept of an “internet coast” to drive the digital future
of energy, health and economic acceleration. All eyes
are on the Chancellor. If he really wants a “march of
the makers”, he must give his full backing to that
exciting vision. The Swansea University bay campus,
which, I emphasise, is based in my Aberavon constituency,
has a huge role to play in the development of the
internet coast. I look at my hon. Friend the Member for
Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for verification of that.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab) indicated assent.

Stephen Kinnock: This outstanding project, made
possible by EU and European Investment Bank funding,
is one of the largest and most important knowledge
economy projects in Europe, producing cutting-edge
research focusing on science and innovation.

The “internet coast” is a plan for the future. It is a
pity the same cannot be said of the Government’s draft
Wales Bill, which does not provide anything like the
lasting settlement that it was intended to create. Instead,
it has thrown up more uncertainties around the legislative
process, and succeeds only in generating reams of
constitutional red tape. Just this week the Welsh Affairs
Committee, under the chairmanship of the hon. Member
for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), called on the
Government to pause the proposed timetable for the
Bill so that there is opportunity to reflect fully. That is
the least that is needed. My specific concern is about
ministerial consent and the risk that the process is seen
as tantamount to an English veto, but my more general
concern is that the Bill has been drafted in a bubble,
isolated from the broader debate about the constitutional
reform that our country so desperately needs.

The UK is more centralised than any other leading
industrialised economy, and the Scottish referendum
demonstrated that the constitutional foundations of the
UK are cracking beneath our feet. The British people
need and deserve better. The piecemeal, make-do and
muddle-through approach that is epitomised by this
Wales Bill is simply not going to get the job done. We
must, therefore, have a full constitutional convention
that would formulate a bold, radical, rational, root-and-
branch reform of our constitution. The convention
would develop a written constitution that is anchored in
a confederal UK, an elected senate, a more proportional
electoral system, and properly defined devolution of
powers to the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

We have also seen the results of government by
muddle in Wales with the Trade Union Bill. Having
taken a sledgehammer to crack a nut, the Government
have found that the nut is not entirely theirs to crack
in the first place. I am delighted that my Labour colleagues
have stood eyeball to eyeball with the Government, and
it was the Government who blinked first. The Trade
Union Bill, coupled with the changes in voter registration
and the alterations in constituency boundaries, are blatant
and disgraceful attempts to turn the UK into a one-party
state, the thinly veiled agenda being to eradicate
parliamentary opposition altogether. Vladimir Putin
would be proud of such fixing. Wales is disproportionately
hit by the boundary changes, losing around a quarter of
our MPs, reducing Wales’s voice in the House and
marginalising the Welsh people.

There is great potential in Wales, but we will realise
that potential only with bold leadership. There is vision
and willingness in Cardiff Bay, but we find those qualities
abyssmally lacking on the Government Benches. As we
go into elections in May, we should remember all that
we have to be proud of in Wales: a Labour Government delivering for working people, creating 50,000 apprenticeships and getting 15,000 young people back to work with Jobs Growth Wales; ground-breaking legislation on violence against women; a Labour Government who have improved the cancer survival rate faster than anywhere in the UK, and who are training more nurses than ever before; a Labour Government who stood up to Westminster to protect farm workers’ wages; a Labour Government who stood by Remploy, while the Tories were shutting it down across the rest of the UK.

Let us remember that it is the work of the Welsh Labour Government under the leadership of First Minister Carwyn Jones that has enabled the creation of 750 jobs at Aston Martin in St Athan. Under Carwyn, Labour will make use of the Welsh Government’s new powers by cutting business rates for small businesses and supporting those advances because, in all dimensions, together we can be proud of. That is why it is vital that we see a kind that creates jobs, opportunity, industry and enterprise in a Labour victory in Wales on 5 May.

Wales has the talent and creativity to emulate our Celtic cousins Scotland and Ireland in gaining strong recognition in the world. Our people achieve far beyond the nation’s size in rugby, football, athletics and so on. With effort and fair chances, we can do the same politically, technologically, environmentally, culturally and economically. I am proud to be Welsh, to be British and to be European. I am certain that we can make those advances because, in all dimensions, together we are stronger.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope we can manage this debate without a formal time limit on speeches. If everyone who has indicated that they wish to speak takes under 10 minutes—that means around nine minutes—everyone will have an equal chance to put their points.

2.22 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): May I take this opportunity to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a belated happy St David’s day? May I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate? Traditionally, it has always been held close to St David’s day. It reminds the entire House that, even in an age of devolution, many of the most important decisions that affect Wales are still taken in these Houses of Parliament.

There have been busy times recently for the Wales Office. We recently had a very full debate on the draft Wales Bill, so I do not propose to rehearse the remarks I made then, save to tell the Minister how pleased I am that he and his colleagues have taken the opportunity to have a pause in the process of developing what will be extremely important legislation. It was generally agreed by hon. Members, and indeed by commentators outside this House, that the draft Bill was really not ready and not fit for purpose.

I am glad that the Minister and his colleagues are giving further consideration to the matter. They are looking at the issue of the list of reservations, but my concern was not so much with the reservations, as he knows, as with the necessity test, which was rather sketchy and ill-defined. I hope he will be able to come back to the House with something that is more fit for purpose.

I wish to speak—briefly, Madam Deputy Speaker—about north Wales, because that is the part of Wales I come from and in which I have lived all my life. Welsh Members frequently think that north Wales is something of an afterthought in Westminster and in Cardiff Bay. In the case of the Welsh Assembly Government, I think few of its members come from north Wales and understand the peculiar circumstances that prevail there. For example, I do not think it is fully understood by members of the Welsh Government that most of north Wales is, in reality, closely tied to north-west England; in fact, it is fair to say that it is very much part of the north-western economic region. That lack of understanding has resulted in certain problems for north Wales, and I am glad to say that north Wales Members of Parliament are beginning to address that through the formation, under the excellent chairmanship of the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), of the new all-party group for the Mersey-Dee north Wales region.

North Wales needs to maintain its close links to north-west England. Traditionally, it has always looked, culturally and economically, to the great cities of north-west England—specifically Manchester and Liverpool. However, devolution carries with it the danger that those historical and traditional links will be loosened. It is important, now that Government policy is firmly focused on developing the northern powerhouse agenda, that north Wales is not overlooked in that process.

One aspect of the northern powerhouse that north Wales needs to link into is the rail network. I was glad when, a few months ago, the Chancellor announced that he was making funds available to upgrade the Halton curve, which many Members on both sides of my constituency are calling for.
the border—not least my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans)—had been pressign for for some time. However, there is much more that needs to be done.

North Wales MPs hear constantly of the wonderful electrification upgrades in south Wales. Before long, the Great Western line will be upgraded to electrified status all the way through to Swansea.

Mrs Moon: Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that it appears from announcements by the Department for Transport that the north Wales line to Manchester will be held by an English franchise and that there will be no opportunity for a Welsh franchise to hold it, because it will not be possible for any franchise that starts or ends in England to be held in Wales?

Mr Jones: I do have concerns about the franchise, but now that the hon. Lady has raised the subject, I am bound to say that the citizens of north Wales would not express much satisfaction with the franchise that has been put in place by the Welsh Assembly Government. Arriva Trains provide a very poor service. It is actually much quicker for me, as a north Wales MP, to travel to London by Virgin Trains than to Cardiff by Arriva. Certainly, issues of topography are partly responsible for that, but they do not explain the appallingly low standards of comfort that one experiences on Arriva. I would certainly hope, therefore, that all aspects of the franchise will be looked at, not least the adequacy of the service that is provided at the moment.

The north Wales coastal line needs to be upgraded. We must not miss out on the opportunity to tap into the new service that will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2. It looks very much as if a new service will be provided as a consequence of the advent of HS2.

In that connection, valuable work is being done by the North Wales Economic Ambition Board, and the new all-party group can play a role in that. It is hoped that there will shortly be a meeting that will be attended by the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (James Wharton), who is the northern powerhouse Minister. I was very pleased to see the Minister at a meeting organised by the board in Llandudno a few months ago. It is essential that the Government do not take their eye off the ball, because electrification of the north Wales line is fundamentally important to the economy of north Wales and to its connectivity with the northern powerhouse.

Similarly, consideration should be given to the Borderlands railway line that runs between Wrexham and Bidston, connecting the two enterprise zones at Wirral Waters and Deeside. Electrification of that stretch of line, particularly between Bidston and Shotton, would provide a relatively inexpensive, but highly desirable, piece of infrastructure. It would put Deeside industrial estate within commuting distance of the centre of Liverpool, again improving connectivity.

Ian C. Lucas: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words earlier. He knows that I strongly share the agenda he is outlining. The Welsh Government have invested £43 million in dualling the Wrexham-Chester line, which is hugely important, and we need to do more. Will he join me in pressing the Welsh Government and the UK Government to put their money where their mouth is? The Welsh Government, to be fair, believe in cross-border transport so much that they have dualled the line in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) rather than in Wrexham, and we want it to run right through to Wrexham.

Mr Jones: Yes, that is the burden of my speech. As the north-eastern part of Wales is so dynamic and so important to the economy of north Wales, as well as that of the country of a whole, and because it straddles a border—a line on the map that was not there in reality until fairly recently—we need to ensure that differing policies on either side of the border do not have any unforeseen effects. Yes, of course it is essential that both the Westminster Government and the Welsh Government should be working extremely closely together in this regard.

Before I sit down, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am very much alert to your strictures on time—I will mention the A55 coast road, or expressway, which is the most important route in the whole of north Wales, linking the areas around the border to Holyhead. The road is now quite old and in desperate need of upgrading. A few years ago, arrangements were made whereby borrowing powers were given to the Welsh Government—in fact, they were given the right to access the old borrowing powers of the Welsh Development Agency—in order to upgrade road infrastructure. That was stated to be specifically for the M4 and the A55. The Welsh Government are taking steps to upgrade the M4 around the Newport area, and that is all well and good, but looking at this from a north Wales point of view, it is rather galling that they do not appear to be accessing these borrowing powers to upgrade the A55. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to give his colleagues in the Welsh Assembly Government the message that they should realise that the A55 is just as important to the people of north Wales as the M4 is to the people of south Wales.

There is a strong perception among us north Wilians that we always get the short straw. I very much hope that the Welsh Government are listening to the contributions made to this debate and will understand that there is life north of Merthyr Tydfil and that the people of north Wales need their own specific economic interests to be reflected—and that means more connectivity and more integration with the great north-west economy.

2.33 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I would like briefly to refer to three issues: first, what has happened to the draft Wales Bill; secondly, the importance of the European Union to Wales; and, thirdly, the need for the third runway at Heathrow airport from a Welsh perspective.

I have to ask where the Secretary of State for Wales is this afternoon. Surely this is an important debate and his place really ought to have been in this Chamber listening to what Members have to say and responding to their remarks. It is not asking too much that he show
some courteousness and political common sense by coming here. I very much hope that he will learn the lesson from his embarrassment this afternoon. The Under-Secretary will clearly take that message back to him.

Quite a significant decision has been taken by the Secretary of State over the past week—to withdraw the draft Wales Bill—but I am concerned that there has been no oral statement or even a written statement. There has been no communication with the House of Commons. We learned about the decision from the press. That is a gross discourtesy and an undermining of the parliamentary system that we are all committed to.

That brings me to my main issue. I ask the House this question: what do the following individuals and organisations have in common? They are the Wales Governance Centre, the leaders of three political parties in Wales, the Learned Society of Wales, Sir Paul Silk, Sir Emyr Jones Parry, the head of the Wales office of the Law Society, and the professor of governance and constitution at University College, London—and the list could go on. The answer is that they all said that the draft Wales Bill was not fit for purpose. There was relative unanimity on that among those in Wales who follow these issues closely—the objective experts and academics, and the people who are at the sharp end of implementing legislation. I am sure the Under-Secretary will say, “Well, yes, that is why we withdrew the Bill—we listened”, but would it not have been better if he had listened at the start?

Concern was expressed about the draft Bill right from the very beginning, when it was first published. I have a copy here, and quite a heavy tome it is. The Secretary of State said in the foreword: “This draft Bill sets out in detail how the Government plans to deliver the St David’s Day commitments to create a stronger, clearer and fairer devolution settlement for Wales that will stand the test of time.”

It stood the test of time for four months, and then he recognised what everybody else was saying—that it was not fit for purpose and he should go back to the drawing board and start all over again.

Mr David Jones: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman’s criticisms, but does he not agree that it is far better to get the legislation right than to bring through hasty legislation that does not stand the test of time? In that regard, did he read the recent report by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee that bemoaned the fact that the Blair Government of 1997 fastened through legislation that has now resulted in the West Lothian question not being addressed?

Wayne David: I agree up to a point. Pre-legislative scrutiny is good—it makes for better legislation—but it would have been far better if the Wales Office had recognised that meaningful constitutional change can be achieved only on the basis of a high degree of political consensus. It cannot be achieved by a Government—any Government—trying to push through legislation that does not command broad support and is seen by some people as partisan and not properly thought through. That was one of the fundamental problems with the draft Bill. Many people thought it was purely impractical and would therefore lead to bad governance. That lesson ought to be learned.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): That part of the splendid report referred to by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) is a fine example of inventing precedent to suit a case. In fact, the words inserted into the report were disputed, because they are a great example of the argument made at the beginning of a splendid book about those times called “Dragons Led by Poodles”, which asserted that only the future is certain, but the past is always changing. That is what the Committee tried to do.

Wayne David: My hon. Friend is too modest to say this, but it is worth pointing out that he was the author of that book. I disagreed with some things in it, but it did have many words of wisdom.

My central point is that those of us who believe in devolution need to recognise that there needs to be a high degree of consensus, dialogue and debate among all politicians involved in the process, both here and in Cardiff Bay. I really hope that when the Government start from scratch, they will have learned the cardinal lesson that they have to consult—genuinely and openly, and on a cross-party basis—opinion here in Westminster. I think that all our colleagues are prepared to contribute.

It is also important that the Government work with the Welsh Assembly. It is very important that we have that dialogue with Cardiff Bay, because, to be frank, it is unthinkable that a Westminster Government could decide a devolution package that is not acceptable to the body to which power is being devolved. If they had proceeded with the draft Bill, we might have been in that situation, ridiculous though it seems. I ask the Government for dialogue not only here, but with our colleagues and friends back in the Welsh Assembly.

My second point is about the European Union. In my view, there is an overwhelmingly strong case for the United Kingdom to remain a full member of the European Union, but that case is particularly strong for us in Wales. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the European Union is vital for jobs, exports and, therefore, prosperity in Wales.

Last week the Prime Minister visited the General Electric aircraft engine maintenance plant in Nantgarw, just outside my constituency. He made his case for why Britain should remain in the EU and why it benefits south Wales and General Electric. Objectively, he had a strong case to make, because General Electric is one of my constituency’s most important employers; many of the workers travel down Nantgarw hill to work there. It recognises how important it is to have a good relationship with the EU and to be an integral part of the single European market. I have no ideological axe to grind; empirically, we recognise that it is good for our economy to be firmly linked to our partners in the rest of Europe. It is as simple and straightforward as that. It is a bread and butter issue.

On Monday night, I met representatives from DS Smith Recycling Ltd, which is a British company with a strong European presence. It is expanding its operations in an innovative way throughout the European Union, and it is a major and important employer in my constituency of Caerphilly. The company is not committed to the left or to the right; it simply wants to expand its work and be a good employer. It recognises that it would be absolute lunacy for itself and the people it employs if we extricated ourselves from the European Union.
The message that went out on Monday evening was, “In the interests of the company, jobs and prosperity, please make sure that the strong case is put for Britain to remain in the European Union.”

The two companies I have mentioned have innovative and well-structured training programmes, which the EU’s structural funds contribute to in large part. Wales has been allocated £2.4 billion from the EU structural funds for the 2014 to 2020 period. Indeed, Wales is a net beneficiary—more money comes in than goes out—to the tune of £838 million a year. There are strong practical reasons for making the case over the next few weeks that Britain and Wales should remain an integral part of the European Union. It makes sense for ordinary people and for the country’s prosperity, to which we are all committed.

My final point is also linked to the prosperity of Wales, namely the question of whether Heathrow should be expanded and have a third runway. As a Welsh MP, I believe that the strongest single argument in favour of the third runway at Heathrow is the positive impact it would have on the Welsh economy. That is not just my view. The First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, was clear the other day that the Welsh Government support the expansion of Heathrow because it would provide the best possible support for investment, tourism and jobs in Wales. His comments are informed by hard facts and clear analysis. It has been estimated that 85% of the new manufacturing jobs that an expanded Heathrow would generate would be created outside London and the south-east. Up to 6,000 of those manufacturing jobs would be in Wales, constituting a significant part of the 8,400 Welsh jobs accompanying a total of £6.2 billion of economic benefit.

Those facts speak for themselves. It is essential that the Government stop shilly-shallying and give the go-ahead for the expansion of Heathrow. It makes sense for the country as a whole and for Wales in particular.

Whether or not Heathrow will bring the best possible benefits to Wales depends on access. That is why it is essential that Heathrow’s expansion is accompanied by the electrification of the Paddington to south Wales railway line and the construction of a rail spur directly to Heathrow. I am aware that a consultation began this week.

Craig Williams: On the subject of Governments dilly-dallying, if we are going to have a third runway at Heathrow—which I support wholeheartedly—would it not make sense for the Welsh Labour Government to get on with the M4 relief road and improve the tunnels and the capacity of the M4 so that we can get to the airport?

Wayne David: I am in favour of that, but the decision is not up to the Government in Cardiff alone. A lot depends on what the Government in London do and on whether financial facilities are made available to the Welsh Government. That is important.

It is vital that a message goes out from the consultation that Network Rail is commencing that the Governments in Cardiff and in London are in favour of the spur to Heathrow. When the Minister replies, I would like him to say that strong representations will be made to Network Rail to make sure that we get the spur. We hope that that will be part of a longer-term project for the expansion of Heathrow airport.

I have spoken about three important issues. We want a coherent draft Wales Bill to be presented, and I hope that it will be formulated on the basis of consensus. I hope that in the next few months many Members in this Chamber will decide to pull together and argue the case for Britain’s continued membership of the European Union, highlighting its importance for Wales. I also hope that we will be able to unite in support of an expanded Heathrow airport. That, again, would be of tremendous benefit to the Welsh economy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. My experiment of having a voluntary time limit has not worked. We will therefore have a formal time limit of nine minutes on Back-Bench speeches.

2.49 pm

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Glyn Davies, Aberconwy (Con): Is it not the case that for a short period of time, mid-Wales was given some support by the Development Board for Rural Wales, which did a fantastic job for the locality?

Glyn Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for offering me the opportunity for some degree of self-congratulation, but I had probably better not take it.

I particularly enjoyed one comment from Megan Lloyd George’s speech, which you may enjoy as well, Madam Deputy Speaker:

“No Englishman”—
I think she meant English women as well, but in those days women were not included as they are today—"can understand the Welsh. However much he may try, and however sympathetic he may feel, he cannot get inside the skin and bones of a Welshman unless he be born again."—[Official Report. 17 October 1944; Vol. 403, c. 2237.]

That explains quite a lot.

I am supportive of making St David’s day a national holiday, and I support the efforts of the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), who is sponsoring a private Member’s Bill under which that decision would be devolved to the National Assembly for Wales. When I was a National Assembly Member, I declared 1 March to be a bank holiday in my office, and the staff were always told that they need not come in to work. If we are not able to agree a bank holiday, I could certainly do the same again.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for supporting that idea. Would he support Plaid Cymru Members if we tabled an amendment to the Wales Bill to remove public holidays from the list of matters reserved to Westminster?

Glyn Davies: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman would expect me to go further than to say that that may well be an idea that could be supported and looked at.

St David was a great Welshman, pure in thought and pure in deed—a condition to which every good Welshman aspires. He performed awe-inspiring miracles. People usually refer to the most famous one, which was to raise the ground on which he was standing in order to be seen. The First Minister of Wales gave that very example in London today in a speech that I heard. What I find most interesting about it is the reflection made by the late Professor John Davies, another great Welshman, who said that he could not “conceive of a miracle more superfluous than the creation of a new hilly Llanddewi Brefi.”

That is true, but it was still a very good trick to pull off.

I want to comment on three areas. They are points that I feel I ought to make in this place as often as I can. The first is on culture. I will then make some comments on sport. I also want to comment on the transfer of power, which will take place under the Wales Bill and to some extent under the constituency boundaries review, from this place to the National Assembly for Wales.

Wales is a great nation of culture—it is part of the Welsh DNA—but the one thing that is particularly special is the Welsh language. It makes Wales different. Not everybody can speak it, but it makes Wales very different from any other part of Britain. We can go to certain places and hear the indigenous language of Welsh being spoken on the street. I think that is very special.

A key part of supporting the Welsh language is Sianel Pedwar Cymru—S4C—the Welsh television channel. Every couple of years, we seem to have to fight very hard to maintain the public support that is needed for such a channel to continue. I hope that Members from all parties in this place will acknowledge its importance in ensuring that the Welsh language thrives and keeps Wales the special place that we all aspire to its being.

I want to talk briefly about sport, but perhaps not to say the obvious things. We know about the Welsh rugby team, and we wish them well. We have a magnificent captain in Sam Warburton. I say that not just for the quality of his play, but for the type of man he is. When I look back on everything I have seen in sport, I will never forget how, when he was so unjustly sent off in the semi-final of the world cup, he looked at the referee, nodded his head and walked off. He showed no disagreement with the referee, but accepted a really unfair decision—the referee’s judgment—and went off. That requires a level of self-control that I find absolutely amazing. To my mind, that makes him a magnificent man. I must of course also make reference to the Welsh football team, who are going to France for the European championship. We wish them well.

I want to mention two other sportsmen. One of them is an international figure, John Charles. I am of a certain age—a lot of Members in the Chamber are young—and in my view he was the best footballer that Britain has ever produced. He is never thought of as such and does not come to people’s minds, but he was an absolutely amazing man. He could leap, above everybody, like a salmon. Actually, he was a little bit like St David in that he could rise himself up, but he did not need a hill. He was appreciated across the world. Again, amazingly, he had the same Warburton-like concept of fairness. He was never sent off or cautioned in the whole of his career. How someone could play at his standard—one of the best players in the world—and never be cautioned, or never have an argument with anyone, is amazing.

The other person I want to mention is a local man from Welshpool, Barry Williams. I played rugby in the midlands and the north of England, and I eventually came back to Welshpool, where we had one team. Sometimes, we were lucky even to get out one full team. In terms of the first team, Welshpool is not much different now, but has up to 10 teams of youngsters—under-eights, under-10s, under-12s and under-14s—playing every week. Barry Williams organises all that. To my mind, he is the sort of individual who makes a massive contribution to Welsh sport and, indeed, to the spirit of encouraging young people to be part of society. I think that Welshpool rugby club—it is not the greatest rugby club in the world, although I thought it was when I played there—has the sort of man we need as an example to everyone right across Wales.

Finally, I want to say one or two things about the Wales Bill, which we have not yet seen. I am one of the few people to be disappointed by the pause. In the end, I acknowledge that there has to be a pause because of the delays in getting to where we are, but I would very much have liked it to be a subject for debate during the National Assembly election. It would have been a real issue of contention. Elections very often finish up as a debate about all sorts of things that are very much unrelated to what they should be about. If it had been an issue in the Welsh Assembly election, we could have focused on the future of Wales and how Wales is governed, which would have been very appropriate.

What I have seen of the Bill so far has pleased me. Clearly, the draft Bill did not receive a level of support that would have enabled it to go forward. We still have the reserved powers model, but it seems that the powers that are reserved will be greatly reduced—something we should all welcome. Other parts of the Bill are important.
The inclusion of income tax responsibilities for the Welsh Government is crucial. It will give them a financial responsibility, rather than just a spending responsibility. That will enable the Welsh Government to grow up. There are a whole lot of other issues on which there is general agreement across all parties. Hopefully, in the end there will be a Bill that Members from all parties can support and that delivers the stable, long-term devolution settlement that all of us in this place would very much like to see.

3.1 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this debate. It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies).

Well done to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing this important time in the Chamber to talk about all things Welsh. He rightly talked about the crisis that the steel industry faces. The issues that he raised in respect of Aberavon also have a huge impact on Llanwern steelworks in my constituency, so I wholeheartedly support the points that he made. This morning, he, I and other Labour Members who are in the Chamber lobbied the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise on those very points, and we will keep saying those things. I support my hon. Friend’s call for more help to protect our industry for the sake of constituents who work in Aberavon and, crucially, in Llanwern. We must never forget the Llanwern workers, given the announcements on job losses. We are feeling the effects of the job losses, too.

We went into this matter in some depth in the debate on steel on Monday. I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister are extremely mindful of these issues, but on behalf of the steelworkers I represent, I ask the Wales Office Ministers to keep speaking up in Government on behalf of the steel industry. I shall not repeat the five asks because we went through them in depth on Monday, but I ask the Minister to please be mindful of them.

I realise that there is a mixed picture in my constituency in respect of steel, because there is positive news at the Orb steelworks, which is also owned by Tata. It produces some of the best-quality transformer steel in the world and delivered a profit in quarter three last year. Liberty steel, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) mentioned in the debate on Monday, has restarted production at the old Alphasteel works and hopes to increase production in the months and years to come. We must acknowledge that news, too.

I know that many hon. Members want to get in, so I want to use this opportunity primarily to bang on about the Severn bridge tolls. I make no apology for doing so again. It is by no means a new issue for the House, but after many years of debate, questions and meetings, it is coming to a head. The bridges will soon come back into public ownership, so we are in the crucial period when discussions are taking place about the level of tolling. We must not miss the opportunity to get the tolls reduced.

As local issues go, the tolls are one of the most frequently raised with me, alongside the overcrowding on the commuter services to Bristol and beyond. Some 12,500 people travel from Newport and Monmouthshire into England every day. There is a transport trap for people in south-east Wales: they can either take the expensive overcrowded train, if they can get on it, or pay the eye-watering tolls on the bridge every day.

If the Minister wants to grant my St David’s day debate wish and, I suspect, the wish of many of my constituents who are commuters or who run local businesses, he will commit to lobby the Department for Transport to slash the tolls to a near-maintenance level when the bridges become publicly owned. The tolls have a huge impact on commuters, and also on access to jobs for many of my constituents, because when people factor in having to pay the tolls, they cannot afford to take many of the jobs that are on offer in Bristol and the surrounding area. There is a huge impact on local businesses—not just hauliers, about whom I will continue to talk in debates on the subject, but other businesses across south Wales that absorb the cost in their bottom line or that in some cases have to relocate to England.

My neighbour the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. Davies) recently discovered in his role as Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee that the debts on the bridges were due to be paid back earlier than expected—as early as autumn 2017—because of tax changes and increased traffic volume. In an answer to a recent written question, I was told that the concession is due to end in 2018. It is therefore really important that we know the answers to the following questions. Will the debts be cleared by 2017, and is it the Minister’s understanding that the concessionaire has had increased revenue? If so, why will the concession end in 2018, not 2017, and what will the concessionaire recoup in the meantime? What discussions are going on, and between whom, about the date on which the concession will end and the future level of the toll? Will Ministers please heed the calls for the tolls to be slashed?

We know that VAT will have to be taken off the tolls when the bridges revert to public ownership—thanks to kindly EU rules, I might add. What would happen to the Severn bridge tolls if we voted to come out of the EU? That is a new angle. It is important that the Government recognise that the change would have happened anyway, so it is not a great gift. We need some clarity about the money that the concessionaire is recouping from the bridges, the current debt and the money that the Government are getting in from the VAT and other taxes.

My plea today is that the Government involve hon. Members with constituency interests in the bridges in their discussions. I appreciate that the Minister will not have all the answers today, but will he at least commit to getting Transport Ministers to write to me with answers to those questions? Would he be able to broker a meeting between me and other hon. Members and the Department for Transport, so that we can find out what is happening?

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon talked about bold leadership in the Welsh Government, and their partnerships and achievements were one of the themes of his speech. In Newport, there is real optimism about the newly opened Friars Walk development.

Paul Flynn: Hear, hear.

Jessica Morden: I thank my hon. Friend. All credit is due to Bob Bright and Newport City Council for their brave political leadership in driving the project through
at a time when hardly anywhere else in the country was building such projects. It is not a silver bullet and will not answer all of Newport’s problems, but 120,000 more people came to our city centre in November. Along with Coleg Gwent’s hope to relocate to the city centre with the University of South Wales, and other developments and partnerships involving businesses and the Welsh Government, it is bringing real optimism to our city. We need the UK Government to play their part, too, to save, protect and build our manufacturing industries. They have a role to play in allowing our city to thrive and grow, and protecting our steel industry is one way to do it.

3.8 pm

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): In the spirit of St David’s day, may I first give huge congratulations to the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate? More importantly, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) for introducing a bit of consensus just before my speech, which I will build on. In that spirit, I add my name to the lobby of the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) on the Severn bridge tolls, which are an important cross-party issue on which we all campaign strongly. I would certainly like to come to the meeting with the Department for Transport if Ministers can arrange that.

I want to touch on several points. I am mindful of the time limit, but as the Member for Cardiff North it would be remiss of me not to start with the Cardiff city deal. I know that my colleagues would be sad if I did not bang on about it for at least half my speech.

It is an important time for Cardiff, and an exciting time to be involved with what I see as the engine room of the Welsh economy—Cardiff and the city region. If the city deal is successful, it could bring a lot of scope, investment and vision together. The next couple of weeks will be incredibly important for our capital city. I want to make a couple of pleas from the Chamber about private sector involvement. I know that the Minister is a champion for us, and I implore him to do anything he can in the spirit of consensus and the framework of the city deal.

The Aston Martin announcement was so welcome and brilliant, and the Minister was integral to that. It resulted from championing by the UK and the Welsh Governments. If we take that partnership approach on many more issues, we could secure much more investment. We are all tempted, so close to an election, to take all the credit for anything positive in Wales, but there are many more companies floating around south Wales—and I hope north Wales—but I am unabashedly the champion of Cardiff—and working together can help secure investment.

Electrification is a key issue. When that happens in Cardiff and then in Swansea, there will be an opportunity to tie into the south Wales metro. I want to work with the Welsh Government and Network Rail to get work in the south Wales valleys into the right control period. I want to be involved in the conversations, for example, about whether the line is heavy or light. I want to do what I can, and I want the spirit of consensus to get into the city deal. I hope that the metro will be at the core of that. I realise that the next couple of months will be difficult and that we might not quite agree on everything in the run-up to the Assembly election. However, in the spirit of consensus, I very much look forward to working with Councillor Jayne Cowan in Cardiff North, who, with 16 years of experience on the council, could help deliver the metro.

I also want briefly to mention IQE in the context of the city deal. It is a great Cardiff and Welsh company that produces the compound semiconductors that we find in most electronic devices. Its relationship with Cardiff University, and the new catapult launched in Cardiff North, are bringing high-end, brilliant manufacturing to Wales—exactly the sort of industry that we need to attract together. By “together”, again I mean the UK and the Welsh Governments.

Without venturing too far into the European debate, I have to say that Cardiff University punches far above its weight. That ties into Horizon 2020 funding and the critical mass we get in the single market for research and development, which I support wholeheartedly. The metro, electrification, IQE and working with the private and third sectors will deliver a Cardiff city deal to rejuvenate south Wales. The valleys are important in the Cardiff city deal, which might start with Cardiff but is incredibly important to that critical work population of about 1.5 million people. Although Cardiff is the engine room of the Welsh economy, we need transformation for south Wales.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Gentleman alluded to the importance of the European Union for Cardiff University and research funding. He knows, of course, that the leader of the Conservative party in the Assembly has said that he will vote for Brexit. What impact does the hon. Gentleman think that that will have on higher education policy in the Conservative manifesto for the Assembly elections?

Craig Williams: The hon. Gentleman is trying to ruin the consensus within my party as well as the debate. I will try my best to skirt around that issue. Although I disagree with Andrew R. T. Davies, a good friend and colleague, we will work those things out when he is First Minister. I therefore would not worry about that.

Let me move on quickly to the redevelopment and challenges that I envisage for the south Wales and Cardiff economy. The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) is not in his place, but I am sure that he will read Hansard later. The barefaced cheek of saying that we are waiting for some sort of financial package from the UK Government for the M4 relief road is unbelievable. That borrowing power—the old Welsh Development Agency powers—has been available to the Welsh Government for a considerable time and they have not done much to progress that.

Mr David Jones: Does my hon. Friend accept that although the Welsh Government may not have done much in south Wales, they have done nothing at all in north Wales?

Craig Williams: I wholeheartedly accept that, and I feel for the A55 as much as I do for the M4. However, the M4 relief road is key for our links to Heathrow, as is the spur for Network Rail. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) referred
to Andrew R. T. Davies—the next First Minister—and he has committed to having, within 12 months, a spade-ready M4 relief road. I massively welcome that and look forward to its coming to fruition.

I am conscious of the time, but I want to touch on the redevelopment of the M4 and the Eastern Bay link road. It is a shame and a travesty that Wales’s capital city does not have a circular road around it, and any visitor to the National Assembly for Wales who comes out of the Bute tutunes then sees the national disgrace of a road that ends—it is a road to nowhere and it needs finishing. I know that phase 1 is now on the cards, but it is ridiculous to do one phase of a circular road, but to leave out a small section up to what would be an excellent gateway to the new M4 relief road. I have also touched on the metro and the tolls, on which there is cross-party consensus.

Let me briefly mention the Commonwealth games, and a bid that we must champion as a nation. Cardiff is at the core of that, but the games have the opportunity to be a real Welsh national Commonwealth games. When we consider what happened in Glasgow and Scotland, and at the Olympics in London, the kind of economic redevelopment and opportunities that a Commonwealth games presents for Wales cannot be missed. I hope that all parties in the upcoming Assembly election will have in their manifests a clear commitment to the Commonwealth games. Sports, businesses and Welsh civic society are behind that bid, and we need political vision and leadership from Cardiff Bay. I hope that that will be the only bid within the United Kingdom, and that we can have full support from the UK Government.

I will now touch on sporting success. I asked permission from my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire to mention one hero, but I will actually mention three. He mentioned Barry Williams. I spent many a Saturday morning more than two decades ago selling match programmes with him, and he is a true champion. We finally have something in common again, because he is up for election in the Peter’s Pie competition for a Welsh rugby hero. Outside of Cardiff North, Welshpool rugby club is the finest rugby club in Wales, and I support his bid wholeheartedly. He is a true champion of Welsh rugby and a great friend.

Lewis Wilkins is a young scientist from my constituency, and he is coming to the House of Commons on Monday as part of the SET for BRITAIN initiative to encourage, support and promote Britain’s early-stage and early-career research scientists. It is a great scheme to get young people into science and research and development so early on. He will be in Portcullis House—I will not give the time and date, but if anyone wants to join me in going to see Lewis Wilkins, they will meet a true champion of science and a true advocate for Cardiff and Cardiff University.

Finally, I want to mention Mrs Beth Baldwin, whose son tragically died of undetected type-1 diabetes. This week she presented a petition to the Assembly on raising awareness of diabetes and on having a simple prick test—perhaps as part of schools’ injection processes—to discover whether children are diabetic. She received the Pride of Britain award, and she is an incredibly brave woman from an incredibly supportive and great Cardiff family that have turned a tragedy into a great campaign. She is a true Welsh hero. I am delighted that she will be coming to No. 10 later this month to present another petition about having a gold standard or minimum for GPs and other health care professionals to routinely test for diabetes.

I hope that I have captured the economic development, excitement and potential of Cardiff and Wales. We should not talk it down too much. We have great opportunities, but a Commonwealth games bid could draw much of that redevelopment together, and I very much want that to happen.

3.19 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It is a tad ungracious to complain about the absence of the Secretary of State for Wales without having sympathy for the dreadful week he has had. On Monday, it was the humiliation of having to withdraw his signature Bill. Things then got worse. Humiliation was heaped on humiliation on Tuesday when he lost a competition in which last year he won first prize. This year, he came in an extremely lowly position. This extremely prestigious competition is run by the Beard Liberation Front. Happily, there was one Welsh parliamentarian, with a beard of a different hue, who managed a creditable position. It is quite right that the Secretary of State wants to hide the pathetic starter beard that disfigures his features and not to be seen in public today. We do understand.

The main point I would like to make, after expressing sympathy with the Secretary of State, is one of optimism for the Welsh nation. I recall in 1957 the publication of a book called “Wythnos yng Nghymru Fydd”, a story about the future in which somebody is transported to 2033. It was a dreadful Wales that he saw. It was a Wales that had changed its name to West England. The language was dead and the Welsh personality had gone. There was another depressing moment in 1962, when the genius Saunders Lewis made his speech “Tynged yr yr faith”. He foresaw a Wales where the language would die and not live beyond the 20th century. When we look at the Wales of today, however, there are huge reasons for satisfaction and optimism.

We had a lovely service this week, with Welsh spoken at its beautiful best by the young children, representing the future, from the Welsh school. The fact is that we have succeeded in the dream. In the 19th century, politicians came here in their droves as Welsh patriots and soon became seduced by this place. Wales was let down, generation after generation. Now, however, we can rejoice. We have our own Parliament on the soil of our country, where we speak both the beautiful languages of Wales. I had the pleasure this week of talking to a delegation from the Icelandic Parliament. While we call ourselves the mother of Parliaments, they call themselves the grandmother of Parliaments. They are in Cardiff today. I am sure they will be equally impressed by the young grandchild of Parliaments, a Parliament that started brilliantly and has achieved much in spite of criticism from outside. I think we can all take pride in the Welsh nation.

In this atmosphere of consensus, one person to whom we should pay great tribute is the man who ensured that Welsh is heard on the lips of all our children in Wales, wherever they live. That was a very courageous decision.
That was the work of Wyn Roberts, who was called the bardic steamroller. He was a member of the Gorsedd bards and his subtlety was regarded as akin to a steamroller. I think that was a little unjust, but we should remember the vital role of steamrollers in the area of construction. He constructed politics. I watched with great admiration the way he took the policy on Welsh language education through a hostile party of his own. We need to acknowledge that great debt.

The issue I would like to raise is one that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). It is the sole point I want to make and it relates to the future of energy in Wales. If we look at our map and our potential, our North sea oil, which is Scotland’s great treasure, is the tide and hydroelectric power. We have allowed this immense source of energy to run to waste untapped. There is an extraordinary devotion to Hinkley Point, which I find inexplicable. It is based entirely on a stubborn view that will not accept the truth and the scientific reality. It will not accept that Hinkley Point is the final manifestation of a technological blind alley. It is an EPR reactor. The one in Finland is now seven years late and £6.7 billion over budget. It will probably never work. The one at Flamanville has had a terrible technological problem in the roof of the reactor’s vessel, and it will probably never finish.

As for finances, if we look on the other side at tidal power and at the source of the energy, we find that it is free, British and of immense power, whereas the source of energy for Hinkley Point is an imported form of fuel that will leave a legacy for all time. The source of the power on the tide is entirely predictable—unlike most other forms of renewable energy such as solar. We can predict precisely how the tide is going to come in and make the energy entirely demand responsive by linking whatever it is—lagoons, barrages or whatever—to electric storage schemes that allow us to pump water up to the heads of the valleys when electricity is required and save the energy when it is not. That is how the Dinorwig power station has provided a vital element in our electricity supply for many years.

Now that it seems we have had yet another year’s delay at Hinkley Point, the Government must come to their senses. They have done an atrocious deal with the French to guarantee them a price of electricity that is twice the present going rate and is guaranteed—and index-linked—for 35 years, yet we cannot guarantee what the price of electricity will be for 35 weeks. This is an extraordinary deal. All the sensible money has retreated from Hinkley Point. Centrica invested £200 million, but it has gone—abandoned the project. All the money left is Chinese, and China is anxious to invest in what it sees as a Hinkley sprat in order to get the mackerel of all the other forms of renewable energy such as solar. We can predict precisely how the tide is going to come in and make the energy entirely demand responsive by linking whatever it is—lagoons, barrages or whatever—to electric storage schemes that allow us to pump water up to the heads of the valleys when electricity is required and save the energy when it is not. That is how the Dinorwig power station has provided a vital element in our electricity supply for many years.

If we look at the evidence at other EPRs, we see that they are going nowhere, so we should recognise that this investment, taken together, is one of the worst investment decisions since the building of the pyramids—when objects of great cost but had no practical value. It is now becoming clear that the established scientific community, which has been locked in this stubborn view that we had to have Hinkley, is realising that we have an enormous financial disaster on our hands—and that at some time it will be necessary to pull out.

What could be better than investing the money in tidal power? Ignored for so long, this great moving cliff of water that comes up and down the Severn—the second highest tide in the world—could provide energy that is green, non-carbon, predictable and eternal in its duration. We have seen examples where it has worked magnificently. Fifty years ago, a barrage was built in La Rance in Brittany, and it still has turbines in pristine condition producing energy that is the cheapest in the world. That, I believe, is the way forward for Wales.

3.28 pm  

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), and it was quite a surprise to hear such a consensual speech from him, which leaves me in the position of carrying on in the tradition of this debate and not being too aggressive in the way I behave.

I also thank the hon. Member for Newport West for his comments about my predecessor, Lord Wyn Roberts of Conwy, which I think were appreciated by all Members and I know will be appreciated by my constituents and Lord Roberts’s family. His contribution was indeed significant. My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) mentioned the A55, and we should not forget that in addition to the work that Wyn Roberts did for the Welsh language, he was the prime mover for the development of the A55 from Chester all the way to Holyhead. It is remarkable that in his maiden speech of 1970, he stated that his ambition as an MP was to ensure that a general hospital was built in Bangor and a dual carriageway was built from Chester to Holyhead. It is quite an achievement for any Member of Parliament to deliver both the promises that he made in his maiden speech, but Wyn delivered so much more.

Sometimes, in a debate such as this, a Member can feel that, occasionally, he or she can make a difference through membership of a Select Committee. We have heard about investment in the Halton curve railway line to provide better connectivity between north Wales and Liverpool, and I agree that that investment is essential to the economy of north Wales. I remember sitting in the Welsh Affairs Committee back in 2011 when we called for that investment. It is good to know that the work that we do in Select Committees occasionally results in changes.

I can paint an upbeat picture of the current economic situation in Wales. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock)—whom I congratulate on securing the debate—spoke of some of the concerns of his constituents, and I am sure that all Members sympathise with them, because what is happening to the steel industry is indeed a matter of grave concern. However, the Government should be proud of the fact that, since 2010—under the coalition and, subsequently, under a majority Conservative Government—we have seen a significant improvement in employment in Wales, and a significant decrease in unemployment. I think that we should be genuinely pleased about the strides that we are making.

I also think that, in the context of a St David’s day debate, it is crucial to emphasise that when the Governments in Westminster and Cardiff work together, we see better
results. That co-operation, that willingness to work together, often results in a better performance on the part of the Welsh economy. I am in a staggering position, in that I have only received really bad news, from an economic perspective, on two occasions since my election. One example was the recent tragic fire at Llandudno Junction, which caused 50 people to lose their positions at Express Linen Services. I find it remarkable that, although I have been a Member of Parliament for nearly six years, that is one of the few examples of job losses that I can remember. The story in Aberconwy is of a halving of unemployment since 2010. More and more people are in employment, and when I talk to businessmen, they are very positive about the future. I think we should acknowledge the successes that have been achieved as a result of co-operation, with successive Secretaries of State trying their best to work with the Welsh Government.

I think that the present Secretary of State has made the right decision in “pausing” the new Wales Bill, because it is unlikely that there will be any willingness to agree on a way forward between now and the Welsh Assembly elections. That was a mature thing to do. The hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who is no longer in the Chamber, should reflect on the fact that it is a brave politician who is willing to pause, and to say that he will look at the evidence and come back with something better. What we want for Wales is a settlement for the long term. Let us be honest: we are building on a devolution settlement that was not about Wales, but all about the Labour party. We are slowly trying to make the settlement more effective and constructive, and I believe that taking time to secure a proper deal is necessary and correct.

The second big issue facing Wales this year is the European referendum on 23 June. I have a long track record as a Euro sceptic. I certainly experienced some difficulties in a former life as a result of my membership of Business for Sterling, a campaign which launched a great political effort to ensure that we did not join the single currency—and no one in the House today would say that we should have joined it. That campaign was correct; we made the right call. Our slogan was simple: “Europe yes, euro no”. Europe is not perfect, but I think that it gives us more than we have to give it, and that we benefit from our membership.

When we are talking about the north Wales economy, it is sobering to reflect that, just last week, the largest company in north Wales, Airbus, stated clearly that it considered membership of the European Union to be important. Moreover, the largest potential investor in north Wales, Horizon Nuclear Power in Anglesey—which is developing what may be the first new-generation nuclear power station, if the hon. Member for Newport West is correct—has also expressed the clear view that it is important for us to remain in the EU.

We should also reflect on the small businesses that benefit from our membership of the European Union. I would like to highlight an example in my constituency. A company called Zip World, run by Sean Taylor, did not exist in 2011. I remember Sean coming to see me and telling me that he was going to set up some zip wires. As someone who is scared of heights, I was not particularly interested, but I can tell the House that that company now employs 240 people from my constituency and those of the hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). Sean has created 240 jobs from scratch in rural Snowdonia, and that is a huge contribution to our economic wellbeing. Even more importantly—my constituency predecessor, Wyn Roberts, would be proud of this fact—70% of those workers are local Welsh speakers. That company makes a huge contribution to keeping those people in their communities, and it was seed-funded by European money.

I am not going to be quite as reasonable as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) on the issue of European grant funding. Wales is a net beneficiary, and it is clear that my constituency of Aberconwy, which is in west Wales and the valleys, is a significant net beneficiary. The figures that I have recently obtained from the local authority, Conwy County Borough Council, show that well over 900 jobs have been created in 240 new ventures as a direct result of the European grant funding of small businesses over the past five years.

Is the European grant spent well in Wales? I do not think so. We could do much better. In a speech at the National Eisteddfod in Denbighshire in 2013, I highlighted the failures of the way in which we spent that European money in Wales, but I started my speech by saying that those failures were a “made in Wales” problem, not a European problem. The problem is the way in which we have used the money in Wales. When we claim that there is waste in the European funding that is allocated on a regional basis, it is important that we highlight where the problem lies. I would argue that the Welsh Government’s lack of willingness to embrace the private sector is more of an issue in regard to the use of European funding than any decision taken in Brussels.

Also on the subject of European grant funding, there has been a fantastic achievement by the Wales Office and the Secretary of State for Wales in at long last establishing the funding floor. We have been asking for that for a very long time. However, I would ask our leader in the Assembly to consider carefully whether he genuinely believes that, with the Barnett floor in place, there would be additional money to make up for the current shortfall if we lost European funding to areas such as mine. I very much question that.

Looking at the European issue from a local perspective, and taking into account agriculture, regional development funding and, more importantly, the trade deals that allow companies such as Airbus and Horizon to invest in north Wales, I believe that despite all the European Union’s flaws, Wales will be stronger in the EU.

3.37 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): St David’s day, 1 March, is a national day of celebration in Wales. It is a day on which to celebrate Wales and being Welsh. We are a proud nation of culture, literature, song, art and sport. I congratulate the Wales women’s rugby team on recently beating Scotland and France at the Knoll ground in my constituency and on qualifying for the world cup. That is a great achievement. It would be remiss of me not to mention squash—the game, not the drink—because in a former life I was the national coach for Squash Wales. As a small nation, we have always punched above our
weight and medalled on many occasions, including the European Championships, in many countries. That leads me to what I want to talk about today, which is the importance of staying in Europe.

In my constituency of Neath and across Wales, we enjoy great opportunities and great benefits as a result of EU membership. I pay tribute to Derek Vaughan, our Member of the European Parliament for Wales, who is vice-chair of the budgetary control committee in the European Parliament. He has fought for the benefits that Wales receives. He is a former leader of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, and he has used his great experience and knowledge as a former leader of the Welsh Local Government Association to fight for Wales in Europe.

Wales is a net beneficiary of the EU to the tune of £838 million a year. Moreover, the lower prices, higher job numbers and increased trade and investment that come from our membership of the EU are worth more than £3,000 a year to the average Welsh household. That is 10 times more than the £274 that each household pays in.

The EU is without doubt the biggest, richest market in the world, upon which, according to the Centre for Economics and Business Research, 191,332 jobs in Wales depend. The economic benefits are clear: for the 2014 to 2020 period, Wales will receive £4.9 billion from the common agricultural policy and structural funds. It is estimated that, over time, the UK could lose as much as 6.1% to 9.5% of our GDP following an exit from the EU. In my constituency, the EU has created 1,120 jobs, helped 6,680 people into work, granted access to further education for 3,490 people and helped 13,630 to gain qualifications. The help in my local authority area—that of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council—that the EU has provided to enterprises has meant that 670 have been assisted and 420 have been created.

One of the best examples of EU funding benefiting my constituency is the newly relaunched Workways Plus scheme, which is led by the local council and has received £7.5 million in EU funding. It offers training and paid work experience opportunities to 4,000 long-term unemployed people to help them get back into work. The support targets disadvantaged people, helping them to take their first steps to re-engage with or enter the labour market; the scheme offers one-to-one mentoring, and support with job-seeking and interview skills. The programme targets individuals affected by work-limiting health conditions and disabilities, as well as those with care responsibilities and low or no skills. It is the perfect scheme to get people back into work, and it continues a similar EU-funded scheme that ran across south-west Wales between 2009 and 2014, which was an enormous success and showed the true benefits that EU funding can bring to our communities.

Not only are there jobs that have benefited from EU funding, but the effects of our membership have benefited the infrastructure in Neath. EU regeneration funds have been used expertly by Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council to regenerate many town centres across the constituency, and this, in turn, has revived the use of these town centres and has helped the local economy get back to strength after tough economic times. Crucially, EU investment and involvement would also help aid the UK steel industry, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said. The UK Government should follow the example of the Welsh Government, who have taken full advantage of our membership of the EU to help fund many of their projects and schemes, such as Jobs Growth Wales, which have helped get the Welsh economy, and the jobs and skills market, back on track.

Business leaders have already warned that leaving the EU would amount to a step into an “Abyss of uncertainty and risk.”

The path for a potential exit is unclear; it has been likened to getting off a bus and into a car, which sounds a dangerous prospect to me. My constituents cannot afford this uncertainty as the negotiations conclude and then a potential exit is negotiated. The economic reality for Wales and for my constituents in Neath is such that Brexit would be disastrous for our jobs and prosperity, not to mention for the benefits we all enjoy, such as workers’ rights, environmental protections, consumer safeguards and free movement.

The Conservative party has treated the issue of our membership of the EU as a political football for many, many years, and the Prime Minister has put so many gaps, businesses and projects into my constituency life line just to appease his own Back Benchers. Rather than address the necessary reforms of the EU in a constructive manner from inside, we face the prospect of an exit, which will be a disaster for Neath and for Wales as a whole.

I cannot speak about matters important to Wales without mentioning another critical issue—the ongoing farce that is the Wales Bill, which, as originally drafted, met with criticism from all sides, including the Welsh Affairs Committee of this House. To make matters worse, we learn, not in this House but from the media, that the Bill is now on pause, pending a major overhaul. As the First Minister said, we are back to where we started. How can the Conservative party justify putting Wales’s economic development and prosperity at risk with its mishandling of this Bill and of our relationship with the EU?

3.45 pm

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak today. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this debate. I am very conscious of what he said about different Members having different matters to raise, as I have several areas of concern that I would like to discuss. I thought I would do that by taking Members on a very quick geographical tour of the south Wales coastline.

I will start at Cardiff Bay, the seat of the National Assembly for Wales. During my time as an Assembly Member, I fell upon what must be one of the most scandalous episodes in Welsh devolution. One of the main jobs of any Government is to ensure that the public receives value for money, but I am afraid that, in this tale, the public received absolutely no value from the Welsh Government in the Regeneration and Investment Fund for Wales. It is crucial that Governments attach the highest importance to public assets, but, on this occasion, the Welsh Government not only sold land for an incredible amount under its true value, but seemed completely complacent during the process of the sale.
There was huge weakness in the oversight of this project. It is incomprehensible that the “jewel in the crown” site at Lisvane in Cardiff was sold to a preferred purchaser for £1.8 million, when its potential open market value for housing was at least £39 million.

Craig Williams: The Welsh Government sold the land in Lisvane in Cardiff North, the most valuable land in Wales with the richest agricultural output, for £15,000 an acre, when it is worth £1.2 million an acre. It is a national scandal. If it had happened in this House, does my hon. Friend think that people would have been held to account and that there would have been resignations?

Byron Davies: I am absolutely sure that my hon. Friend is right. I am amazed that the First Minister did not hold anyone to account and sack them. That perhaps speaks volumes.

Indeed, Guernsey-based South Wales Land Developments, the preferred purchaser, which bought 15 sites for £21 million, has made £19 million by selling just a few of them. That casts a very dark shadow over what the Welsh Government were doing during the process. The cavalier approach to the disposal of public assets is quite disturbing. Furthermore, questions must be asked about the valuers, Lambert Smith Hampton, and the fund managers, Amber Infrastructure, which gave the Welsh Government extremely poor advice.

There have been two recent reports on the Regeneration Investment Fund for Wales by the Wales Audit Office and the Welsh Assembly Public Accounts Committee, both of which are damning in respect of all parties involved in the deal. The Wales Audit Office made it clear that effective oversight of the project was difficult because of the governance weaknesses in establishing the RIFW. I know that the Serious Fraud Office has taken a look at the matter, but how deep did it go? I would like it to reassess any new evidence. Anything the Wales Office can do to get to the bottom of the issue would be very welcome.

Moving on further down the coastline, we come to the steelworks at Port Talbot, which plays a huge part in the economic fabric of the country, but of the social fabric, and nowhere is that truer than in my constituency of Gower. For decades, the works has provided for people across south Wales. They either work directly at the plant or in the supply chain. Indeed, the community surrounding the steelworks has survived, and indeed thrived, because of the plant. It is a crucial part of the community, and it is vital that we work together to ensure that the industry has a successful and prosperous future.

I have met Ministers and discussed their efforts to help the steel industry win procurement contracts. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will help where he can to stimulate the demand for steel, which will have a positive knock-on effect on opening up opportunities in the supply chain in Wales. I recently visited Rosyth in Scotland to see the new aircraft carriers and was delighted to learn that 94% of the steel used in their construction was British steel.

Continuing our journey around the south Wales coastline, we come to Swansea Bay and the Swansea tidal lagoon. Much political point-scoring has been attempted on this, particularly in the local press, which is rather a shame. We are all at one—we all want to see the scheme developed. It will be a pilot scheme and we should realise that it will cost a awful lot of money to develop. There will be a great deal of public money involved, but it is the first of what could be several schemes. The Government are right to sit down and look at the whole thing in the round. I hope we will see it developed one day, and I know that other politicians in the area share that hope.

I was delighted with the recent announcement from Sir Terry Matthews about the Swansea Bay region. That scheme needs to be pushed along, perhaps through an elected mayor system. I am keen for that debate to be opened in Swansea. We need more infrastructure in Swansea, such as a parkway railway station. At present there is Swansea railway station at one end of the town and the bus station at the other end. For a successful bay region, we should consider that.

I shall move quickly round to the Burry inlet and talk about my constituency and the north end of Gower, the first area of outstanding natural beauty in the UK. I want to speak about the loss of the cockle industry and the loss to the economy of about £23 million over 10 years. That was once an extremely successful industry in Gower that supported the community and was the livelihood of many people. Now there is a 95% mortality of the cockles when they get to one year old. They should live to four or five years old. They are usually harvested when they are 18 months to two years old, but can be harvested up to about five years.

The problem has existed for about 10 years. The cockle beds have never recovered since 2005 when the mortality started. In 2000, this area had the best cockles in Europe and exported to France and Spain, bringing tens of millions of pounds into the region. The cockles are no longer suitable for the high-end market and there is a limit to how many small cockles can be sold. The nucleus of the cockle industry is Penclawdd and there are questions about its viability now that the main processor has been taken over by a Dutch company.

Local cocklers are unable to guarantee a regular supply of cockles to the processors. The season starts in May but is finished by July, whereas it used to be a year-round business. The cocklers believe that the cockles are being killed by discharges of sewage from waste treatment plants on the south Carmarthenshire side and from sewage works at Gowerton. Samples have been taken of dead and rotting cockles from some of the last ones and these have been analysed, but we have never seen the results. The cocklers are calling for further scientific research, including a parasitology investigation, which has never been carried out before and requires funding from the Welsh Government. Research has discovered that each cockle in these waters carries up to 29 different types of parasite, many times more than is found in cockle stocks elsewhere in the UK and along the Atlantic seaboard from north Africa up to Scandinavia.

There are 35 licences still in existence in the Burry inlet and 25 of them are still being used. People are paying for licences but cannot make a living. In the 1960s and 1970s, up to 100 people were working there, gathering cockles 52 weeks a year. The licences cost £700 a year but they can no longer be transferred to sons or relatives, who have to go on a waiting list to be given a licence. There are still 120 people on the waiting
list in Gower. There is much hope in the community that the industry will recover, and here in this House we must do all we can to support the efforts to help the industry.

When I was an Assembly Member I raised the matter many times in the Chamber. Since I have been a Member of this House I have written to the Welsh Government to try to get them to fund an inquiry into why the cockles are dying. To date I have had no success. We need to find the cause of this problem and ensure that the cocklers whose livelihood has been greatly affected are treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve to get this great product and industry thriving again. Anything that the Welsh Office can do to encourage the Welsh Government into action would be very welcome.

3.55 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important debate on Welsh affairs, which marks St David’s day.

I would like to focus on three issues, albeit briefly. First, there is no doubt that Wales has been hit hard by the UK Tory Government’s austerity measures. In my constituency advice surgeries, the most common theme is the hardship people face due to the welfare reform agenda being pursued by the Tory Government. I think there are Tory Members who do not understand the situation people find themselves in.

Specifically, the spare room subsidy, or bedroom tax, is harming people in my constituency and across Wales. A report by the Welsh Affairs Committee in 2013 showed that Wales was disproportionately affected compared with the rest of Britain, and that remains the case. This tax is, quite frankly, the most unfair and pernicious since Margaret Thatcher’s poll tax.

I have spoken with staff at my local citizens advice bureau in Merthyr Tydfil, who have told me about the many cases they regularly see coming through their doors—people who have nowhere else to turn. Those clients already have a number of other significant issues in their lives, and the bedroom tax only adds to them. Some of those people are now in rent arrears because of it, and some could lose their homes. That could have massive consequences, and for those who are physically or mentally disabled, it could result in even more severe issues, such as homelessness, suicidal thoughts, substance misuse or further debt—a downward spiral.

Unfortunately, in many communities in my constituency, there is not a huge number of smaller properties. Therefore, people affected by the bedroom tax decide either to stay in their property, thus incurring a financial penalty and placing great strain on their ability to manage, or to move to a smaller property, which can often be in a village some miles away. I have spoken with constituents who are in debt for the first time because of having to pay the bedroom tax. Food bank usage has increased massively, which is totally unacceptable in 21st-century Britain.

The second issue I want to focus on is the forthcoming EU referendum. As other Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon and for Neath (Christina Rees), have outlined, Wales has benefited considerably from EU investment. Projects right across Wales have been delivered using EU funding, which is vital in helping to create a skilled and inclusive labour market and in driving economic prosperity.

Byron Davies: When we had the first round of funding, the then First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, said it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but here we are now with a third round of funding. Would the hon. Gentleman like to comment on that?

Gerald Jones: EU funding is important, and it has benefited Wales considerably—the evidence is there in terms of jobs and the businesses that have been supported—but there is still work to do. [Interruption.] If I may, I will carry on.

A key example of the projects I mentioned is the Welsh Labour Government’s Jobs Growth Wales fund, which has supported more than 15,000 young people across Wales since 2012, when it was created in response to the Tories’ scrapping of the future jobs fund. Using £25 million of European funding, the programme has supported countless young people. There are many more examples of how the EU has benefited Wales, which is why it is so important for Wales that the UK remains a strong part of the EU.

I turn now to the Wales Bill. As the party that established the Welsh Assembly, the Labour party supports the additional powers for Wales proposed in the draft Bill, but we had significant concerns about how the Assembly’s powers were rolled back in other parts of the Bill. It is fair to say that the draft Bill was not met with universal support. In fact, despite the Welsh Affairs Committee having witnesses from various aspects of Welsh life, it was a struggle to find anyone who had anything positive to say about it. I am pleased that the Secretary of State has finally listened to the overwhelming body of evidence from experts, lawyers and politicians from all parties, and to the Committee’s recent report. The Bill is deeply flawed and I welcome the fact that he is now not pushing ahead with it in its current form.

Labour Members have been raising concerns about the Bill since its publication last October. If those concerns had been listened to then, perhaps we would not be in this situation now. Only last month, in the Welsh Grand Committee, many of the same concerns were again raised with the Secretary of State, who at that point, just a few short weeks ago, was defending many of the provisions he now seems to have binned.

It is only fair, right and proper that Members of this House, and indeed members of the Welsh Affairs Committee, have clarity about the detail of what the Secretary of State announced on Monday. Specifically, we need to know if anything is going to replace the necessity test, what system will be used for Minister of the Crown consents, and how different the list of reservations will be. It is imperative that the Secretary of State gets the Bill right this time and sticks to a timetable. Any delay means a consequent delay in the powers being transferred to the Welsh Assembly. It is also important that the Secretary of State and the Government fully consult the Welsh Government to iron out the practicalities.

The fact that the Secretary of State has presented a radically different Bill from the one that the Select Committee scrutinised may be problematic. The Committee’s report states:

“Whilst this pre-legislative process has flushed out views, it has also made it apparent that the final Bill will be significantly
different to that which we have been scrutinising. That is wrong. Whilst changes and improvements are what this process seeks to provide, the weight of the evidence we have received means we have had to focus on fundamental principles of the draft Bill rather than the specifics of the text. The Government should have focused its effort on resolving these matters of principle, before proceeding with a draft Bill.3

The Secretary of State said that he wanted a lasting devolution settlement that would resolve the constitutional situation for a generation, and I am sure that is what we all want. The best way to get it is to consult and negotiate with all stakeholders, such as the Welsh Government, the Welsh public sector, and other key interested parties to get broad agreement on the direction of travel and iron out the practical difficulties and issues. Ideally that should have been done before the Bill was put to this House, but it should be done now. The Bill is deeply flawed as it stands, and progress is needed. I urge the Secretary of State—who is now, thankfully, in his place—to get things back on track.

4.2 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I am sure that Welsh Members who see me, as an English Member, rise to address this debate will be a little curious as to my intentions. Let me reassure them, and the House, that I am not here to assert my historical right to use my crossbow with extreme prejudice on any of their fellow countrymen I might find within the walls of my beloved city after the hours of darkness. It is a historical right but I certainly do not intend to assert it.

In fact, I hope to give something of a mirror image of the speech by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) about the importance of cross-border working between north Wales and my area of west Cheshire and Merseyside. He talked about a border that does not exist. That border might have prevented me from taking part in this debate, but, as he said, it is a border in name only. Indeed, Colin Brew, chief executive of West Cheshire and North Wales chamber of commerce—a cross-border body—tells me that business, in particular, does not recognise the border. When the Minister was at a North Wales CBI dinner just before Christmas at which I was present, he felt very confident and positive about this strategic area.

Let me give some examples. Of the 5,000 skilled manufacturing workers at Airbus in Broughton—which is, in essence, in Chester but across the border in north Wales—at least 600 live in my constituency. The situation is similar for other major manufacturing employers, such as Toyota and Tata Steel on the Deeside industrial park, which my good friend and parliamentary next-door neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), visited last week because so many of his constituents work there.

It works both ways. For example, Bank of America MBNA is one of Chester’s most prestigious employers and is based on Chester business park. It employs about 3,500 people, a third of whom live in north Wales. The cross-border region has a population of about 1 million, 81% of whom work in the region, but whether they live in north Wales and work in England, or the other way around, is scarcely relevant for them.

I was pleased to join noble Lords, right hon. and hon. Members of all parties and local government representatives from the Mersey Dee Alliance at a meeting—this was mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman—and impress on them the importance of that link road. The group and the alliance will work together to prevent needless duplication; propel economic growth; provide flexibility for greater cross-border co-operation within the parameters of existing local government frameworks; and, above all, overcome administrative differences created by the national boundary running through a successful and functioning economic region.

I reject the Government’s notion of a northern powerhouse. I believe it is nothing more than a slogan from a Government who are very adept at using slogans to hoodwink and mollify those of us outside London and the south-east of England while our imbalanced economy continues to grow at an imbalanced rate in an imbalanced direction.

Given that economic growth in north-west England is focused on the big cities, there remains a danger that Cheshire and north Wales will be squeezed out. The MDA initiative will give us strength to stand our ground, stand up to that squeeze and punch at our true weight. Discussions are currently taking place about local government reorganisation in England. Anything that would force Cheshire West and Chester to look the wrong way, as opposed to across the border, would be very unhelpful to north Wales, as well as to Chester. I ask the Minister to bear that in mind in his discussions with the Treasury and the Department for Communities and Local Government.

If we are to maximise the natural economic link between north Wales and Chester, we must optimise our infrastructure, which is important to north Wales and west Cheshire. As the West Cheshire and North Wales chamber of commerce has said, this is all about connectivity. I want to give the Minister a couple of examples of how it might be improved.

For starters, the M56 motorway in Cheshire must be upgraded. Although it is in England, it is the main link road to north Wales—people also use it to get to Holyhead and Ireland—and it provides the principal access to industrial zones in Deeside and to industrial parks in Wrexham via the A483. Serious accidents and major delays are a weekly occurrence, but Department for Transport Ministers have declined to include the upgrade of the M56 to a smart motorway in any programmes before 2020. Will Wales Office Ministers have words with their Department for Transport colleagues and impress on them the importance of that link road to north Wales, including its role as a driver of the north Wales economy?

We also hope to get a new bridge over the Dee near Broughton, which would link the A55 and A494, thereby improving access to the industrial zones I have mentioned, particularly near the Airbus site, and increasing capacity and resilience in the network. I have written to the
National Infrastructure Commission in support of that major project and I ask Ministers to seriously consider supporting the proposal.

There is also a strong case for the electrification of the north Wales coast line, from Crewe to Chester and on to Holyhead. The Minister and the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), who has responsibility for rail, attended a meeting in Llandudno last year. She expressed the view that electrification was not the magic bullet that many of us believe it to be. It is the view of Mersey Dee Alliance members, however, that electrification of the line is necessary for performance, capacity and reliability, and to run larger electric trains from Holyhead to London. The right hon. Member for Clwyd West mentioned the importance of linking it to HS2 in Crewe. I do not want the benefits of HS2 to terminate at Crewe; I want them to extend to Chester and north Wales.

It is important for the future prospects of Cheshire and north Wales that the UK votes to remain in the European Union, as other hon. Members have said. So many of our major employers in the Mersey Dee Alliance area are dependent on our relationship with Europe. Airbus is the obvious example. To Members who claim that a so-called membership fee of £55 million a day is the cost of EU membership, I say that every time the Beluga flies out of the Airbus plant into the north Wales skies with products that are the result of skilled manufacturing, the fee, bogus as it is, is paid off.

Bank of America, Tata Steel and Bristol-Myers Squibb all have a presence in the area that is central to their European operations. That is not to mention the countless smaller businesses that trade with Europe but would not have the time or energy to worry about negotiating through trade barriers with each EU country, should we leave. Those businesses simply could not afford to wait for the chimera of a promised free trade deal, which is supposedly the answer to every argument that proponents for the chimera of a promised free trade deal, which is supposedly the answer to every argument that proponents of our leaving the EU cannot face up to.

I finish by echoing the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Member for Clwyd West and continuing the consensual note that he brought to the debate by daring to suggest that many residents of north Wales feel a stronger affinity with Chester and west Cheshire than they do with Cardiff. We in the region are doing something about that; we are working together to drive forward common economic growth across that border. I hope and believe that hon. Members will be hearing a lot more about the Mersey Dee Alliance and our successes in the years to come.

4.11 pm

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) will relate to one issue that cropped up earlier today, because he has done a great deal of work on the mis-selling of interest rate swap products and led our campaign on the matter. I have done a little work on that as well, and I have tried to represent the interests of my farming community. I am concerned about a letter that I saw this morning from a bank to one of my constituents. I had no hesitation in referring my constituent—a farmer, who has worked hard and continues to do so, and who wants to develop his business—to the Financial Ombudsman Service to attempt to get some redress and independent adjudication. The bank wrote:

“If the FOS agrees with us, they will not have our permission”— so says the bank—

“to consider your complaint and so will only be able to do so in very limited circumstances. If you do not refer your complaint to the FOS within six months, the FOS will not have our permission”.

That is the bank talking, not the independent adjudicator, the ombudsman. I will not go into the specifics of the case, but it is a concerning state of affairs when the banks regard the ombudsman in such a way, and when my constituent is treated with such contempt.

Transport has been a big theme of the debate. I want to raise the issue of physical connectivity. If the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) has been, to use her words, “banging on” about the Severn bridge tolls for a long time, I have been talking about the Aberystwyth to Shrewsbury railway for a long time. There have been great advances, and I pay tribute to the Assembly Government for instigating an hourly service and investing in a new signalling system. I very much welcome the fact that Welsh Ministers are likely to be the franchising authority for Wales and the borders by 2017. Negotiations are taking place between the Government in Wales and the Department for Transport. Concerns have, however, been expressed about the remapping of services in the franchise. The Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passenger Association is very concerned about consideration being given to splitting the current Cambrian coast and Aberystwyth to Birmingham service, meaning that all trains will terminate in Shrewsbury, rather than going all the way through to the west midlands. I understand the logic of a neat franchise boundary, but that will have an impact on constituents.

We have spent a long time promoting the tourism sector in west Wales and building links between Aberystwyth and west Wales and Birmingham International airport. During the previous Parliament, the Welsh Affairs Committee looked at the direct route through to the airport. It is now a great success, with 50% more trains through to Aberystwyth and a 40% increase in the number of passengers using the service. I hope that the Wales Office will, if it has not already done so, become engaged in those discussions, and at the very
[Mr Mark Williams]

least voice the concerns that some of us have about the need for direct services from the midlands to west Wales.

Guto Bebb: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Williams: I will give way briefly, because I am conscious of the time.

Guto Bebb: Aberystwyth University is important to the economy of mid-Wales. Such connectivity is important to the university in attracting students from Wales and from outside Wales.

Mr Williams: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I know he has a potential interest in Aberystwyth University, and I commend it unreservedly to the Bebb family. Whether they come by road or on the train, the issue is important in developing the university.

I commend to the House early-day motion 1073 on the proposed closure and franchising of Crown post offices. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales will be interested in the one in his constituency of Vale of Glamorgan. Both Governments rightly talk about the vibrancy of the high street, and few of us would doubt the economic benefits that Post Office Ltd brings to our communities, so there is an inconsistency in franchising post offices, such as mine in Aberystwyth, out of the high street and into some backwater or into the back corner of a retailer.

There is also the effect on staff. The hard-working staff in Aberystwyth Crown post office were given the choice of redundancy, redeployment to the nearest Crown post office—in our case, that is the one in Port Talbot—or possibly transferring to employment by the retailer concerned, with wages and work conditions that were far from conducive to such a move. I urge Ministers in the Wales Office to look at those issues and to intervene with Ministers from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to encourage them to protect such valued businesses on the high street in our communities.

Not only post offices but banks have been leaving the high street. There have been bank closures in rural areas. In my constituency, banks in Aberaeron, Llandysul, New Quay and Tregaron have left the community. One reason why banks leave is that, as they say, so much bank business is now undertaken via internet banking.

I make no apology for talking again about broadband provision and mobile coverage in my constituency. The Under-Secretary of State was very kind to me, or I think he was, when he told me during last week’s Welsh questions that he was persistent. I am persistent, but I am increasingly frustrated, as are many of my constituents. We still have significant problems in rural parts of Wales; this applies not only in rural parts, but I am standing up for a rural area. We fall into the bottom 10% of seats represented in the House for average download speeds and superfast availability. Since Christmas, my constituency office has already had 100 concerned constituents from different parts of Ceredigion coming to us. We sit 639th out of 650 constituencies across the UK for broadband provision, which is bad. There has been some progress and there have been some advances, but, quite frankly, not enough for areas such as ours.

If broadband provision is bad, I must say that the Government’s mobile infrastructure project is far worse. Arqiva, their agents, has identified 24 sites across the Ceredigion constituency for new masts to alleviate the problem of “not spots” and lack of mobile reception. It spoke to landowners, the county council and community councils. It all sounded so impressive at the start:

“A publicly funded project to provide mobile phone coverage by all four Mobile Network Operators in areas that have none at present.”

The scheme ends at the end of this month. We were promised 24 masts; three masts will be achieved, one of which was already there. That mast was built by the excellent Ger-y-Gors community project, under the leadership of Duncan Taylor of Pontrhydfendigaid. One of them was a £60,000 makeover of a mast and just one other mast was built. Nationwide across the United Kingdom, 600 masts were identified, but by the end of March only about 50 will have been built.

This issue is not just about domestic households. We have talked a lot about building our economy and the advances that have been made. Surely the most basic infrastructure in areas such as mine is broadband and basic mobile coverage. My constituency is as vibrant, innovative, creative and entrepreneurial as anywhere else, but it is being denied the most basic infrastructure. That must be addressed by both the UK and the Welsh Governments. If funds have been available to the Assembly Government, they need to publicise them more and make them more available, and there need to be additional resources for rural areas such as mine.

Finally—I will not go beyond the 46 seconds I have left—it came as no great surprise to me that Ceredigion was listed in The Sunday Times as the most pro-European Union constituency in Britain, according to YouGov. That has a huge amount to do with our excellent universities and the collaborative work they are doing with those on the continent. It has a huge amount to do with the fact that we have qualified for and used money from convergence funding over the last few years. That is for good reason, because there are significant pockets of deprivation in the constituency. It also has a lot to do with farmers, who are concerned about the blank sheet of paper being offered to them by the out campaigns and UKIP. I look forward to a massive yes vote in Ceredigion on 23 June, even if I still have some concerns about the date.

4.21 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): We have become very accustomed to waiting for things in Wales. We waited a very long time for rail electrification, we waited patiently to get the Welsh national football team into the Euros, and we waited a very long time for a Welsh premier league football club, but now Swansea City is there. Today, we waited a very long time for the Secretary of State to make an appearance in this very important debate. Either our performances are not up to scratch or he has had a better offer, because he has chosen to leave the Chamber.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I am happy to announce to the hon. Lady that the Secretary of State has an important telephone conversation with the Minister for Economy, Science and Transport in the Welsh Government.
Carolyn Harris: It was nice to see him for a short period of time.

We are now waiting for a review of the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. We waited a full year for the negotiations between the developer and the Government, and now we are being asked to wait while the Government establish an independent review of tidal lagoons nationwide. My first reaction to that news was to ask the very same questions that many of my constituents threw at me: Why are the goalposts being moved again? After so much talking, what is there left to learn? Is it a sign that the Government are serious about the project, or is it an airports-style way of kicking it into touch without losing votes in an election year in Wales?

Having discussed the review with the developer, I am encouraged because although it thinks the wait is frustrating, it is optimistic that the scene is being set for success. It has to be hoped that the launch of an independent review of tidal lagoons represents a new level of commitment from the Government. I hope that if the Government are investing time and money in reviewing the concept, they too can see the potential of this exciting new industry. If the review is genuinely meant to be the vehicle through which this technology can at last be realised, it will be to the good, but if this stalling is just to kick the scheme into the long grass, it will be a travesty.

Wales and my constituency of Swansea East will be the big winners from the launch of a UK tidal lagoon, but the whole country will share the success of this globally ground-breaking innovation. I look forward eagerly to the quick formation of a committee and a chair—a committee that, one naturally assumes, will have Welsh representation among its members. I look forward to seeing the details of how the review will operate, who will be involved and when it will report. I will follow those developments closely, as I know many people here and in the other place will. We also eagerly await updates from the Department of Energy and Climate Change regarding the progression of negotiations on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon.

The UK needs to seize this opportunity. We have to be seen as the leader, not a follower, in tidal power. We have the potential to have the first tidal lagoon in the world to secure planning permission. The project can be delivered, and it could match costs with other energy projects that are springing up around the country. Swansea East is ready to host this new global industry, and Swansea is ready to be that leader.

What may be lost on many Members is the effect that the lagoon has already had in transforming my community. People have bought into the vision in a way that has not been seen before, and as that vision has become ever more real it has brought with it a new high morale and a new can-do attitude. It has given rise to many plans, from small businesses in and around Swansea bay to the industrial facilities that are ready to win contracts for the Swansea bay city region and the Sir Terry Matthews strategy for a city deal. As plans for further tidal lagoons around the Welsh coastline start to take shape, the sense of optimism will spread.

There is growing international interest in the plans, which are putting Swansea and Wales on the map. I conclude my speech in this St David’s day debate with a message for all colleagues in the House: here is an issue on which we can and should all agree. Here is an opportunity that the whole of Wales and the UK can benefit from. Let us work together and ensure that tidal power brings world acclaim to Swansea, Wales and Great Britain, and that we have the first tidal lagoon in the world. On the morning when a tidal lagoon opens for the first time, the words “good morning” need to be spoken as “bore da”, not “bonjour”.

4.27 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinéfwr) (PC): I will start by talking about the European Union, as many Members have during the debate. I will vote yes for a number of reasons. In a previous life I was an international historian in the international politics department at Aberystwyth, a world-renowned department in our country. It was set up in the aftermath of the first world war, following a generous donation of £20,000 by the great industrialist David Davies Llandinam to honour the dead and maimed students of the university. Davies was motivated—I will quote the university’s website, because I could not put it better myself—“by a global vision, forged in the fires of war, aimed at repairing the shattered family of nations and, more ambitiously, to redeem the claims of men and women in a great global commonwealth”.

My academic speciality was both world wars and the cold war. No one should ever question the vital role played by greater economic co-operation on the continent, and by the European Union, in forging lasting security, prosperity and peace.

I will vote to remain also because Wales is a net beneficiary of EU support, to the tune of £4 billion by 2020 if match funding is added. To its credit, the EU has redistributive mechanisms whereby resources and investment are aimed at the poorest geographical areas—mechanisms sadly lacking in the UK, which I suggest is a matter of shame for Unionists. I have yet to see a contingency plan from the UK for what would happen if they oversaw a calamitous exit from the EU. In contrast to the EU’s mechanisms, the UK fails to allocate spending based on need and instead ploughs its infrastructure investment into already vastly wealthy areas at the expense of those desperately in need of it.

UK membership of the EU has also played an important part in driving social justice, be it in protecting people from discrimination based on age, sex, race, religion or disability, in maternity and parental leave entitlements, or in the right to paid holidays and working hours limited to 48 hours a week.

As a net exporter, the Welsh economy benefits hugely from the single market and its 500 million consumers. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) gave an important statistic about the importance of the UK’s relationship with the single market and the 500 million consumers in it. He made that point with vivid reason.

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is making a passionate case, but people have been asked to vote for and against the European Union, and the Welsh Government are not making a passionate case for us in staying in. It is true that we have freedom of movement, but we have choice. The Welsh Government have not been making that case in a passionate way, which is why I have not heard a passionate case for staying in.

Jonathan Edwards: I was not going to mention the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, but the hon. Gentleman has led me to it. He knows that...
there are genuine concerns about how TTIP could impact on public services, and about the privatisation of public services. That is one of my concerns about the European Union—I am not an unconditional supporter because it has fostered those liberalising policies that successive Westminster Governments have introduced for our public services. The fear is that TTIP could be a Trojan horse for promoting those liberalising policies even further, especially in public services. That is why I believe that the Welsh Government should have a veto on whether the UK Government sign up to TTIP. I am also somewhat sceptical about the European Union because of its treatment of the Greek people in their hour of need recently.

Although I will vote to remain, I believe that the Prime Minister’s current tactics are dangerous and ill judged. Project Fear 2, and the use of all the assets of the state to ramp up risk and anxiety, may prove to be a short-term success in securing a vote to remain in June. However, a gaping wound will be created when people feel that they have been cheated and bullied. As we see in Scotland following Project Fear 1, the battle might be won from a Unionist perspective, but ultimately the war will be lost. If the UK Government’s position is to settle in Scotland following Project Fear 1, the battle might be won from a Unionist perspective, but ultimately the war will be lost. If the UK Government’s position is to settle the European question, they need to fight a positive campaign, and as I have outlined, there are numerous things that they could say.

I welcome the Secretary of State’s decision to delay the introduction of the Wales Bill following pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft measure. I am pleased that the Secretary of State seems to have agreed to remove the necessity tests from the Bill. I hope that he has taken note of the excellent work in the Cardiff University/University College London report, which stresses that the model itself makes the necessity tests unworkable, rather than the choice of words, “necessary” or otherwise.

I also welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has agreed to shorten the list of reservations significantly. However, as always, the proof of the pudding will be in the detail of the Bill when it is published. He will know from the pre-legislative scrutiny that two reservations in particular make the Bill unworkable—the reservations of the criminal law and private law mechanisms. While I am encouraged by his promise to shorten the list, his reluctance to accept the evidence on the need for a distinct jurisdiction leads me to believe that he will not remove criminal law and private law from the list.

Indeed, the Welsh Affairs Committee, which has a Tory majority and is chaired by one of the most prominent anti-devolution MPs, accepted that creating a distinct legal jurisdiction would “provide a solution to issues associated with the reservation of civil and criminal law and necessity clauses.”

When redrafting the Bill, and the list of reservations in particular, the Secretary of State should ensure that each and every reservation is individually justified. I believe that the Secretary of State is serious about creating a long-lasting devolution settlement and I share his ambition, but unless he fights against his devo-sceptic fringes, he will just be yet another Secretary of State for Wales who creates yet another failed devolution settlement.

The context of the rewriting of the Bill has also been changed by the decision to cut more than a quarter of Welsh MPs. If the UK Government want to make those cuts to Wales’s representation, they must give the National Assembly the same powers as the Scottish Parliament—the number of Scottish MPs was cut following transfer of powers. That means full transfer of responsibility over energy and the Crown Estate, full income tax powers, transfer of policing and criminal justice, the legal system, transport, air passenger duty, and the rest of the provisions in the Scotland Act. The Government cannot expect those responsibilities to remain with the UK Government and Westminster with only 29 Welsh MPs. That would create a gaping democratic deficit.

I want to turn my attention to one economic project in Wales about which I have not had the opportunity to comment in any great detail to date—the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Despite Wales being one of the most advantageous locations in Europe for renewable energy, just 10.1% of our electricity is generated from renewable sources. That compares with 32% in Scotland and 14.9% for the UK as a whole. Despite Wales being home to the second highest tidal range in the world, and 1,200 km of coastline, we are lagging behind on tidal technology. I understand concerns about the proposed financing model. Proponents of the contract for difference strike price model argue that the Swansea lagoon is nowhere near as big as the planned Cardiff and Colwyn bay lagoons, and that therefore the strike price on a per megawatt basis seems high. However, it must be considered as a long-term investment that will eventually deliver multiple lagoons across the UK.

Funding green energy through a CFD effectively passes the cost of upfront investment on to the consumer, who inevitably will see their bills go up. If I were in the shoes of the Secretary of State, I would make the case that the Treasury should invest in the project by bringing it on to the books directly, as happens for transport infrastructure such as HS2 in England. Raising money on the bond markets has never been cheaper, with 50-year bonds at a negative rate and 10-year bonds at less than 1.5%. Those rates are available only to the Government and not the private sector. Using an old-school financing method—direct public investment—as opposed to an ultimately far more costly financing scheme such as CFD, will be far cheaper in the end for the public, and the UK Government should be honest with the people of Wales about that.

The Treasury will be aware of my early-day motion tabled earlier this week, which calls for a specific Welsh public sector pooled pension fund. Instead of letting the pension assets of Welsh public sector workers be pillaged by a super pooled asset fund based in England, why is the Wales Office not ensuring that Welsh assets are pooled at a Welsh level to invest in Welsh infrastructure such as the lagoon? I recognise, however, that that model would require a CFD. Confidence is the magic trick in any economic policy, and moving forward quickly on the proposed lagoon will be a massive confidence boost for the south and west of our country, stimulating further economic investment and growth.

4.36 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this important St David’s day debate, and on his work to champion the steel industry. Today he mentioned not just the steel industry, but the need for
clear and consistent messages from the UK Government if we are to encourage more investment from a range of different industries.

The right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) emphasised the importance of transport links to the economy of north Wales. That theme was taken up by many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) who suggested the need to upgrade the busy M6, and to think beyond Crewe for HS2 so that it serves Chester and north Wales. Along with other Members he stressed the importance of staying in the EU, particularly for the success of big companies such as Airbus, as well as a host of other companies in his constituency and over the border.

The hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) reminded us that Gordon Brown was right in keeping the UK out of the euro, and the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) made a strong case for the EU, mentioning peace, political stability, social justice, economic matters, and the fairer distribution of resources from which Wales benefits. My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) explained why it is important to campaign for proper links to Heathrow airport and to support its expansion, and he made a strong case for the need for better rail electrification to Wales. He also referred to the Wales Bill, and the fact that the Secretary of State was not here.

The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) spoke of the Cardiff city deal, as one would expect, and of the importance of interesting young people in science and innovation. My hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) spoke of the Wales Bill and thanked the Welsh Affairs Committee for all its hard work on that. He also pointed out some of the considerable problems with the Bill. The hon. Member for Gower (Byron Davies) mentioned the importance of the cockle industry and of getting to grips with the causes of those cockle deaths. We must get more information so that we better understand exactly what is happening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) talked about the need to get on and secure the tidal lagoon project and the jobs for the area. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) also mentioned tidal power, referring to the eternal nature of the tide. He stressed again the importance of the Welsh language. My predecessor as Llanelli MP, Jim Griffiths, was the first Secretary of State for Wales. I know he would very much have approved of my hon. Friend’s speech today.

How could I possibly skip over what my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) said about the Severn bridge tolls? That issue is absolutely crucial for us across the whole of south Wales. She emphasised the point about the end of the concession. When is it happening and what will the reduction in price be? We want something much more substantial than the mere reduction in VAT.

The hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) mentioned dairy farming. I am sure he will be supporting the farmers’ march in London on 23 March. We shall certainly be speaking with one voice with them on the need to increase the powers of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to get a fairer price for our farmers. He also spoke of how the ground rose up around St David, propelling him above the crowd. We wondered today whether the Secretary of State is showing himself as a reverse St David, disappearing into the earth and appearing for only a few minutes at today’s debate—that is utterly disgraceful, I have to say. This comes in the week when he has treated the House with complete disdain by announcing a major U-turn on the Wales Bill at a press conference in Cardiff and refusing to come to the House to answer questions. Does the Secretary of State for Wales not think that a debate on Welsh affairs and the Wales Bill are worthy of his time?

I can only assume that the reason the Secretary of State is hiding in the Wales Office is that he is as embarrassed as he should be that his flagship constitutional Bill has run aground. What we saw on Monday was quite remarkable: large parts of the Bill that the Secretary of State was defending to the hilt just last month have now been binned. This amounts to a major change in policy in the one piece of proposed legislation for which his Department is responsible. It is shameful that he was more than happy to take questions from journalists but not from Members of this House whose constituents deserve to know what powers their Assembly will have. The Wales Office even tweeted on Monday to suggest that MPs should be happy to wait until today’s Backbench debate to have their say. I hope he is listening.

It is a shocking discourtesy to Members and is reminiscent of the arrogance the Secretary of State has shown towards the Welsh Government and to those who have disagreed with him. Let us not forget that shortly before we met at the Welsh Grand Committee, he said those of us who dare to challenge his rosy view of the Bill had given up on the Union. We were told that we had basically gone and joined Plaid Cymru because we suggested that the necessity test should go, the rules on ministerial consent should change and that the list of reservations should be drastically reduced. Now, he apparently agrees with us. Has the Secretary of State had a last-minute conversion to the separatist cause, or does he recognise that his hysterical comments were just a desperate attempt to deflect from the shambles of his draft Bill?

I am glad the Secretary of State has seen sense and will not now push ahead with a deeply flawed piece of proposed legislation, but let us not pretend that all this is business as usual. It is not a normal part of pre-legislative scrutiny to then go on and dump the Bill, and nor is this a normal part of pre-legislative scrutiny to then go on and dump the Bill, and nor is this an example of a Secretary of State in listening mode. He wanted and fully intended to go ahead with a Bill that was complex, unworkable and which rolled back the powers of the Welsh Assembly. He only changed course when it became clear that literally no one supported him.

The Welsh Affairs Committee, with its Conservative majority, has produced an excellent report on the draft Bill. I would like to place on record my thanks to the members of that Committee for all their hard work. Their report, like the report of the Assembly’s Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee before it, shows that the Secretary of State has mismanaged the process from start to finish. Instead of producing a Bill with a robust set of reserved powers, he allowed Whitehall free rein to decide which powers it thought Wales should have. That resulted in 34 pages of reservations, covering 267 areas. How could the Secretary of State possibly have thought that this was the clear and lasting devolution
on contributing to today's important debate in Westminster's calendar—one that underlines the role that Wales plays within the United Kingdom. I welcome all the contributions of right hon. and hon. Members and I will do my best to cover as many points raised within the limited time remaining.

The debate has been extremely wide ranging and has covered issues across the spectrum of the constitution, the European Union, the economy, public services, the tidal lagoon, the railways, the northern powerhouse and many other issues. I shall canter through as many as I can, but I want to spend some time on the Wales Bill in order to respond to the questions from the shadow Secretary of State for Wales and others. I shall address some other points, too.

Let me start my opening remarks by saying that Wales is in a good place. I am optimistic about our future. As a Government, we have been determined to make a difference to all parts of the UK, and while the job is not complete and there is always obviously more work to be done, we have taken positive action that sets the scene for a bright outlook for Wales. We are determined to work constructively with the Welsh Government, and whatever rhetoric we hear from individuals within Cardiff Bay, we are determined to respond in the measured fashion that the people of Wales deserve.

We want to secure our economic recovery, which was our greatest challenge when we came to office in 2010. Members will remember that unemployment was rising and for too many young people there was little prospect of employment, with the UK and Wales in a precarious financial position. Few Members, however, have mentioned the funding floor, so I was grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) for doing so. This has been called for by Members for well over a decade, and it is only a Conservative Administration who have delivered it—and within the first year of their Parliament.

**Glyn Davies:** Previously, throughout my time in this Parliament and, indeed, in the Welsh Assembly, the Barnett deficit dominated every discussion, and was often raised by Opposition Members. Now we are in balance. Fair funding for Wales is one of the Government's biggest achievements, but it is not being properly recognised by everyone.

**Alun Cairns:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for emphasising that point. The 11¾% rate of Barnett consequentials is extremely important—it entirely meets the criteria in the Holtham demands—but one would almost think that Labour and Plaid Cymru Members were disappointed that we had actually delivered on something that they had been calling for. They would far rather be shouting from the sidelines, calling for it in the hope that we would not deliver it. When we respond in a positive way and deliver for the people of Wales, there is complete silence.

**Jonathan Edwards:** Obviously the Barnett formula is a step forward, but does this not underline the danger of using opaque terms such as “fairness” and “non-detriment”? In my view, a fair funding settlement should be based on need rather than serving to prevent further injustice. As the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) pointed out, the key aspect of non-detriment is the fiscal framework.
Has the Minister any idea of the preferred index for which the Welsh Labour Government are arguing with the Treasury? It is clear that different mechanisms will have vastly different outcomes.

**Alun Cairns**: The hon. Gentleman has made some important points. It is, of course, up to the Labour party to explain its position. All I know is that Labour called for this for decades, we responded within a year, and since then there has been complete silence on the Opposition Benches.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy was extremely upbeat about Wales’s economic prospects. It is true that, since 2010, the number of people in work has risen by 89,000; unemployment has fallen by 35%; the youth claimant count has fallen by 61%, and Wales has experienced faster growth per head than any other nation or region of the United Kingdom outside London.

The hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) spoke of the importance of getting people into work. This is action, and this is where it is happening.

We have been getting behind Welsh businesses, and there are 22,000 more small and medium-sized enterprises in Wales than there were in 2010. The hon. Member for Aberavon mentioned the steel sector. I know that he spoke to the Secretary of State and the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise earlier today about the issues facing the steel industry and, in particular, the communities around Port Talbot, but I hope he will recognise that the Government have gone a long way towards meeting the five asks from the steel industry.

One of those asks was a cut in business rates, which were mentioned by some Opposition Members. That is a devolved matter, and something that the Welsh Government could do. The energy-intensive industry compensation package has been delivered, as has the provision of more time in which to comply with the EU’s industrial emissions directive. As for EU-level action on anti-dumping, the UK Government are leading the pressure that is being exerted in Brussels. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise that, along with a range of other measures that we have taken.

**Stephen Kinnock**: The Minister was going OK until he got to the bit about dumping. I am sorry, but we cannot let that one go. There are two key facts. The British Government are the ringleader of a group of member states that is blocking the scrapping of the lesser duty rule, which would make a huge difference to the ability to impose tariffs on unfairly dumped Chinese steel. They are also the chief cheerleader for Beijing in Brussels when it comes to giving market economy status to China, which would also dramatically reduce the scope. It must be recognised that, in respect of those two points, it is a case of abject failure.

**Alun Cairns**: I am sorry to hear that response, which raised two issues. The first is the confusion over market economy status. Russia has market economy status, but that does not prevent the European Union from introducing tariffs or prevent it from taking action. The other measures that the hon. Gentleman mentioned would take three years to introduce. We want to take action before then. We want to continue to be proactive. We want to work with the hon. Gentleman, the Welsh Government and the communities in and around Port Talbot and Newport, because of the importance of the steel industry to them.

In 2014-15 there were 102 inward investment projects in Wales, 98% of which were supported by UK Trade & Investment. That demonstrates the role that the UK is determined to play in supporting the Welsh economy, and in working with the Welsh Government.

The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) mentioned welfare reforms. Welfare reforms are very important to getting people back to work, but we cannot pick one element individually. We need to look at the wider package, such as the national living wage, which would increase the incomes of 150,000 people in Wales by 2020. That will make someone working full time on the national living wage £4,400 better off, on top of the tax cuts that they will receive as a result of the increase in the personal allowance.

The Cardiff city deal was mentioned by many hon. Members, most notably my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams), who has spearheaded and championed that cause and been persistent at every turn. He has been relentless, first as a candidate and now as a Member of Parliament, in pressing Ministers on this issue. Let me make it clear that we want this deal to be signed as quickly as possible and we are determined to press those involved in order to develop a world-class deal. We want Wales to look outwards and we want it to involve the private sector. We want the city deal to be a world beater in what it delivers. Hon. Members should recognise the fact that the spending review has already announced our “in principle” commitment to support a new investment fund, and earlier this year the Chancellor committed £50 million to establish a UK compound semiconductor centre as a down-payment on the city deal.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) talked about ensuring that north Wales was recognised and about the importance of the northern powerhouse, a subject that was also raised by the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson). There was a focus on the importance of rail links, and I hope that bringing the HS2 investment forward by six years will provide great opportunities for mid-Wales, north Wales and Cheshire through the links to the northern powerhouse. The hon. Member for City of Chester talked about local government reorganisation and the need to look towards Wales. I would also say that local government in Wales needs to look across the border. I think that it does so, but the Welsh Government need to recognise the fact that it is an administrative border and that the way in which people lead their lives means that they cross that border in a much more open way.

I could also go on at length about the investments that the prison in north Wales and Hitachi’s involvement at Wylfa will bring. Much has been said about the tidal lagoon project in Swansea. The Tidal Lagoon Swansea Bay company has recognised the importance of the change and welcomed it. I wish that hon. Members would reflect on what they are saying in this context and support the company rather than seeking to undermine the project, which could involve a significant investment.

In the time remaining, I want to talk briefly about the Wales Bill. We said at the outset that it was a draft Bill and that we wanted to be pragmatic and to use pre-legislative
scrutiny positively. Given some of the negative points that have been made, however, I want to say that we will take absolutely no lessons from the party that gave us the Government of Wales Act 2006 and the convoluted and complex legislative competence order system, which has led to a great deal of legislative confusion. We are determined to get this right, and this pause needs to be taken in the positive spirit in which it was intended.

There have been calls to adjust the necessity test, but we plan to go further and to remove it. We will look at the list of reservations, but it also gives clarity. I encourage members to look at the Scotland Bill, which also has quite a long list of reservations, but there have been no complaints because of the clarity that it provides. Many people are calling for a distinct legal jurisdiction, but that would effectively mean a separate legal jurisdiction. That would be dangerous for Wales, in relation not only to the legislative process but to investment. We are also determined to work constructively to clear up the mess that we inherited with the pre-commencement orders. We want to get this Bill right, and we are being pragmatic. If we ploughed ahead, we would be criticised. We are determined to work constructively to clear up the mess that we inherited with the pre-commencement orders. We want to get this Bill right, and we are being pragmatic. If we ploughed ahead, we would be criticised. It seems that, according to Labour Members, whatever the Wales Office does, it cannot win.

4.59 pm

**Stephen Kinnock:** I should like to thank the entire House for an excellent debate today. We have covered a wide range of issues including the economy, the EU, the Wales Bill, the Severn bridge toll, road and rail, city deals and public services. The red threads that run through all these subjects are the ideas of partnership, investment and solidarity. We know that we need to work together with the European Union and across the UK, and we hope that we will see that spirit of partnership from the Government, alongside investments to enable us to take our economy forward to a brighter future. I thank the House for this debate.

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

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**Diabetes Care**

_Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn._

(Alan Cairns)

5 pm

**Keith Vaz** (Leicester East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to debate this important matter. I begin by declaring my interests as a type 2 diabetic and chair of the all-party parliamentary group for diabetes. In 2007, I founded the diabetes charity Silver Star, and I am an active and passionate supporter of Diabetes UK and JDRF—the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation—both of which provide secretarial services to the APPG. I would argue that we currently have the best diabetes Minister we have ever had, and I am glad to see her on the Front Bench today. I would like to thank her and her diabetes tsar, Jonathan Valabhji, for all the work that they do.

Diabetes is one of the most important health challenges facing the NHS and indeed the world. Sometimes we get immune to the facts, even though they are so devastating: 3.5 million people in the UK have been diagnosed with diabetes; 700 people a day are diagnosed with the illness; by the end of this debate 15 more people will have been diagnosed with diabetes—that is one every 2 minutes; and it is estimated that by 2025 some 5 million people in the United Kingdom will have diabetes.

Despite the good intentions of the Government, the passion of practitioners and the interest of many Members of this House, I am worried that the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diabetes is not high enough on the agenda. One in five hospital admissions for heart failure, heart attack and stroke are people with diabetes. Diabetes is responsible for more than 135 amputations a week, four out of five of which are avoidable. Diabetes is the leading cause of preventable sight loss and the most common cause of kidney failure. Every year, more than 24,000 people die prematurely due to diabetes.

**Mr George Howarth** (Knowsley) (Lab): I echo my right hon. Friend’s comments about the Minister. He cites statistics, and on the amount of money that is spent on diabetes, £7 billion of the NHS budget is spent on dealing with the avoidable complications to which he has just referred. Yet Department of Health spending on research into diabetes through the UK’s Medical Research Council is just £6.5 million, which is by far the lowest level of almost any developed country. Does he think there is a connection between those two things?

**Keith Vaz:** My right hon. Friend, who is a great campaigner on this issue, is right to have raised this, because we need to spend much more on diabetes research. One way of doing that is to make sure the funds are available for the excellent researchers and academics we have in this field, because research has indicated that there is an unacceptable and unexplained disparity in diabetes care in our country. We are failing the very people we are trying to help. Secondary complications are largely avoidable through better care, and we need to ask why this is not being provided. Although the NHS currently spends approximately £10 billion on diabetes, it is estimated that 80% of these costs are spent on dealing with complications. The time for conferences, seminars and good words is over—it is time for a new deal for diabetes.
Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee published a report on the “Management of adult diabetes services in the NHS”, and I would like to thank those on the Committee for their very hard work. The report found that astonishing variations still exist across clinical commissioning groups: the percentage of patients receiving all the recommended care processes ranged from 30% in some areas to 76% in others; and the percentage of patients achieving three treatment targets ranged from 28% to 48% in different areas between 2012 and 2013. As well as this postcode lottery, the figures were even worse for type 1 diabetic patients.

In response to my recent written question, the Minister acknowledged that there is no specific budget allocation for public health services related to diabetes. It is up to local authorities to “assess local needs, prioritise and deploy available resources accordingly.”

I believe that is wrong. My own health and wellbeing board was unable to tell me how much it has spent on diabetes awareness. It should be able to do so. I welcome the Government’s inclusion of diabetes in their proposed clinical commissioning group improvement and assessment framework. That is a vital step in the development of a cohesive national diabetes strategy.

There has been much discussion about how effective the framework will be, and whether it will be released on time. We are already disappointed that the publication of the childhood obesity strategy has been delayed, a pertinent issue of concern for me and many other Members, including the Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). We need an assurance from the Minister today that both the framework and the childhood obesity strategy will be published before the start of the summer recess.

The burden of care for diabetes is currently left overwhelmingly to one group: the GPs. It is unrealistic to expect GPs alone to manage this. We acknowledge that GPs are under increasing pressure, and the demand for their services far outweighs the supply. In some places, it takes weeks to get an appointment. The financial incentives given to GPs are clearly not working. Some 16% of GPs’ contracts is supposed to be spent on incentives, with 15% of this sum being directly allocated to diabetes testing. That equates to £94 million, yet an estimated 549,000 people have type 2 diabetes, but remain undiagnosed. A recent study by Pharmacy Voice found that 40% of GPs would like more support for their patients in managing diabetes. We need an action plan from NHS England that will assess the practical support that clinical staff need to care properly for their patients.

We are often told that it takes a village to raise a child. That phrase was recently given re-emphasis by Hillary Clinton. In my view, it takes a whole town of healthcare professionals to deal with the diabetes tsunami. Instead of placing the entire burden on GPs, we need to utilise a network of different professionals to attack the diabetes epidemic on all fronts in an efficient and cost-effective way.

At an international conference organised by the all-party group last month, we heard evidence to that effect from specialist GP Dr Paul Newman, endocrinologists Dr Sam Rice and Dr Abbi Lulsegged, diabetes nurse Sara Da Costa, diabetes specialist dietician Julie Taplin and lifestyle expert Emma James. However, we did not have time to hear from other parts of the network—the podiatrists, ophthalmologists and pharmacists. Their enthusiasm knows no bounds, but they are limited by the availability of funds and the lack of specialist staff. We must mobilise our political will to give them the support that they so desperately need.

Diabetes specialist nurses are vital in the fight against diabetes. Evidence shows that these nurses are cost-effective, improve clinical outcomes and reduce the length of patient stays in hospital. I am extremely concerned that the number of trained diabetes specialist nurses has stagnated. The latest national diabetes in-patient audit stated that one third of hospital sites still have no specific diabetes in-patient specialist nurses. With the predicted increase in diabetes cases to 5 million by 2025, it is alarming that forward-thinking plans to train such nurses are not being put in place now. We need a commitment from the Minister that there will be future provision for diabetes specialist nurses.

Community pharmacies are ideally placed to provide care at a time and in a place convenient to patients. The NHS diabetes prevention programme could be a great opportunity to get community pharmacies involved in supporting GPs and other healthcare providers. Janice Perkins, the pharmacy superintendent of Well Pharmacies, advised me that this could be done as part of a care plan package, where appropriate tests are provided to the patient based on their personal need, without their having to access numerous sites.

The proposed cuts to the community pharmacy budget could see the closure of up to 3,000 sites. My local pharmacist, Rajesh Vaitha of the Medicine Chest in Leicester, informed me that up to 60 out of 227 sites could close in Leicester alone. The closure of these pharmacies will have an adverse effect on patients and will place greater pressure on our already strained health infrastructure. Pharmacies are on the high street, and no appointment is needed to see the pharmacist. Like many patients, my late mother Merlyn, a type 1 diabetic, had great faith in her local high street pharmacist. I believe that the cuts to community pharmacies could be shelved if pharmacies were properly utilised in diabetes care.

Last Friday I visited the Steno Diabetes Centre in Copenhagen. Steno is a world-leading out-patient facility that cares for 6,500 diabetics a year. It is a one-stop centre for diabetics, with the main focus on prevention and secondary complications. The Steno centre is run by a team of remarkable diabetes specialist nurses led by Professor John Nolan. This is extremely cost-effective—the centre has an annual clinical budget for 6,500 patients of £9 million. Steno has reduced avoidable blindness in its patients by 90%—a service that is provided by a team of just six nurses and one ophthalmologist. The centre’s foot clinic has reduced avoidable amputations in the past 10 years by 82%. The savings from avoiding just two amputations funds the entire foot clinic’s annual budget. The Steno centre is an ideal model of how diabetes care should be facilitated. I urge the Minister—not that I want her to spend too much time abroad—to look at the incredible work that is being done there and bring a network of such centres to the United Kingdom.

In my own constituency, we are very fortunate to have not only the best football team in the country—many thanks to West Ham, Swansea and Liverpool for what
they did last night—but the Leicester Diabetes Centre, a centre of true excellence in diabetes care. It is one of the largest facilities in Europe for clinical research into diabetes. Run by the dynamic duo of Professor Melanie Davies and Professor Kamlesh Khunti, it provides an innovative partnership between the NHS and academia—the very people in whom we should put more faith and behind whom we should put more funds, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) said. We are extremely fortunate to have such experts, but we need more centres of excellence.

We need an holistic approach to public health, tackling the medical complications of diabetes and the contributory lifestyle factors that increase the prevalence of type 2. Other countries have taken a lead on this issue. Dr Francisco George, director general for health in Portugal, told me that data sharing is one thing we can do. I have also heard from Dr Pablo Kuri Morales, the Minister responsible for health promotion in Mexico, that a sugar tax actually works. Press speculation is that the Prime Minister has shelved the sugar tax until after the European Union referendum. In my view, the two matters are entirely separate, so why can we not have a sugar tax now?

I have been vocal in my support for a sugar tax and for clearer labelling of sugar content. Industry leaders such as Waitrose and Asda have made commitments to reduce sugar in their products, but I am afraid that the Government’s responsibility deal, which pledged to do all kinds of things, has not had much effect in reality, as recent reports by Professor Graham MacGregor and Action on Sugar have shown. We are, however, fortunate to have an NHS chief executive—Simon Stevens—who has imposed his own 20% sugar tax across the NHS, and that is an important start. I call on the Minister, when she returns to Richmond House, to ban high-sugar products from the canteens in her own Department.

I recently visited a brilliant juvenile diabetes centre in Tangiers, which was based in the Centre de Santé Saïd Noussairi. I nearly wept when I saw young type 1 diabetics having to rely on charitable funding just to get their daily insulin injection—something we can get absolutely free from our NHS. Yet, astonishingly, even in our country, whose healthcare system is the envy of the world, we have stark variations in diabetes treatment and unfocused resources.

We have world-leading medical professionals, nurses, healthcare professionals and researchers who are capable of doing, and willing to do, so much more, provided they get the funding and are backed by an iron political will. That is why we need to achieve a new deal for diabetics, and now is the time to start.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): I should start by saying that, as a Spurs season ticket holder, I shall dwell on the kind words of the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) about my time in office and ignore his cruel jibes about what can only be described as a disappointing night last night.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this important issue to the House for another debate. He has rightly issued a number of challenges to me and the Government, and it is vital that we keep up the drumbeat of debate, which is key to making sure that we keep this serious and increasingly prevalent disease on the agenda.

Fantastic work has been done by the right hon. Gentleman and other members of the all-party group, by the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth), who is also in the Chamber, by the Silver Star charity and by so many others. There is very high awareness of the issue in Parliament, and I will come back to what more we might be able to do to mobilise Members even more on this important subject.

As the House will be aware, tackling diabetes is of great concern to the Government. The Department of Health is committed to preventing type 2 diabetes and to tackling the variation the right hon. Member for Leicester East highlighted in the delivery of care, because we, too, want the best possible care for those with diabetes.

There were encouraging signs from the latest national diabetes audit that progress is being made in some important areas of management and care. For example, there are clear trends of improvement in blood pressure control for people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes and in glucose control for type 1 diabetes. It is also reported that a far greater number of people are being offered structured education within a year of diagnosis. However, I will come back to structured education, because it is uptake, not offer, that I am interested in.

The report again highlighted a concerning and continuing issue of variation in care process completion and treatment target achievement for people with diabetes. I am particularly troubled by the statistics on younger people and those with type 1. The audit found that in 2014–15 just 39% of people with type 1 diabetes received all eight care processes compared with 59% of those with type 2. There is an even greater contrast with regard to age range.

Mr George Howarth: As the Minister will be aware, because I have discussed it with her before, there is a specific group of young type 1 diabetics who manipulate their insulin intake to achieve rapid weight loss. Will she give some thought to how that group, which is relatively small, can be supported to get out of that problem, which is life-threatening?

Jane Ellison: I will certainly take that issue away and reflect on it, and we will speak about it again.

For people under 40, only 27% with type 1 diabetes and 41% with type 2 received all care processes, compared with 58% and 65% respectively for those aged between 65 and 79. I have some sense of why that is, but it does highlight the challenge we face. Encouragingly, 77% of those newly diagnosed with type 2 diabetes were offered structured education, but again the percentage was lower for type 1. That is clearly unacceptable, because everyone with diabetes should receive the best possible care regardless of age, postcode or the type they have been diagnosed with. That is why, in our 2016–17 refresh of the mandate to NHS England, we have made tackling variation in the management and care of people with diabetes a key priority over the lifetime of this Parliament.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the Minister agree that we need consistently early diagnosis? Early intervention is particularly important in diabetes care,
as it saves the NHS from unnecessary expenditure in the long run, and, just as importantly, saves patients from unnecessary suffering.

Jane Ellison: That is absolutely right. I am going to talk about the national diabetes prevention programme, which goes to the heart of the problem. When I spoke to the all-party group, I mentioned the conveyer belt that can start with weight in childhood developing into type 2 and go through to the serious complications that have been alluded to. At all points along that continuum, there are things we can do, and must be doing, to make life better for people with diabetes.

Because of the mandate, diabetes is now right at the heart of NHS England’s agenda. We want it to lead a step change in preventing ill health and supporting people to live healthier lives. Our 2020 goal is for a measurable reduction in variation in the management and care of people with diabetes. However, there is some way to go, so this debate is an opportunity to update the House on some of the areas where we are going to make progress.

We have increased transparency through the creation of the Healthier Lives website, which is a major online tool from Public Health England. I encourage Members who have not looked at it to do so. It highlights variation in the prevalence and treatment of diabetes, allowing clinical commissioning groups and GP practices to compare how well they deliver diabetes care and so drive improvements and iron out variation. I will come on to the support that we are offering them as well.

The CCG outcomes indicator set provides clear comparative information. As was said, it will soon be replaced by the improvement and assessment framework, which will have two diabetes indicators aimed at reducing variation in the achievement of the NICE treatment targets and the referral and take-up of structured education. Consultation on the framework has just closed, and we expect it be published in the summer. It goes to the heart of tackling variation and the cohesive approach that was spoken about.

The NHS Right Care programme is a very practical approach to tackling variation that uses the “Atlas of Variation”. In the case of diabetes, NHS experts help CCGs and other local health system partners to make the step change they need in some areas to improve care, because transparency alone is not enough if we do not offer people support and hands-on advice. In Slough, for example, huge improvements have been made through a clinical mentorship programme that has upskilled healthcare professionals in general practices. That has resulted in an increase in patients who have had their blood glucose, blood pressure and cholesterol controlled. The Right Care programme will be rolled out across CCGs nationally by 2018.

I urge the all-party group on diabetes and the right hon. Member for Leicester East to continue to engage colleagues. It is absolutely right that Ministers are brought to the House and scrutinised about what we can do, but the very nature of our health system and the variation under discussion are also highly susceptible to pressure at local level from well-informed Members and senior councillors. I encourage him to continue to engage Members in asking the right questions at a local level.

Keith Vaz: I will be brief, because I know that the Minister has a lot to tell us. When Members of Parliament write to local health and wellbeing boards, it would help enormously if they were able to tell us how much they spend on diabetes awareness. They cannot do that at present.

Jane Ellison: Part of the challenge is because much of the effort that is put in relates to the preventive agenda and the contributory factors. That is one of the challenges in teasing such figures apart. However, I will reflect on whether we can do more in terms of health and wellbeing boards.

To incentivise improvements in the treatment and care of children and young people with diabetes, the best practice tariff for paediatric diabetes provides an annual payment for every child and young person under the age of 19 with the condition, providing that 13 standards of care are met. One of those standards relates to structured education. As the right hon. Members for Leicester East and for Knowsley know, I am passionate about making changes to the way in which we do structured education. We know that it works and that it is very good when people do it, but we also know that a lot of people are not accessing it. I am looking really hard at how we could take a new and radical approach, including whether there are any tech solutions, and I look forward to reporting back on that.

Our ambitions extend further than creating a level playing field. We want the management of and care for diabetes to be driven up right across the board in order to improve outcomes. The NHS is working with a number of other organisations to help to promote services that are integrated around patients’ needs across all settings. It is implementing a customer service platform to empower patients with diabetes to self-manage by booking their own appointments, managing their prescriptions, monitoring the care they have received and viewing their personal health records.

I fear that time will not allow me to touch on prevention in as much detail as I would have liked, but I want to emphasise just how seriously we take it. The right hon. Member for Leicester East has outlined the reasons why it is important, including the escalating figures and how much the rising tide of type 2 diabetes associated with lifestyle will cost the NHS in the future. The factors can be modified, and one of the most powerful weapons in our armoury is the NHS diabetes prevention programme, which is the first national type 2 diabetes prevention programme to be delivered at scale. Its aim is to help people identified as at the highest risk of developing type 2 diabetes to lower their weight, increase physical activity and improve their diet through intensive lifestyle intervention programmes. I am pleased to inform the House that the first providers will be announced by the NHS shortly, and the programme will move ahead.

The programme will also link to the NHS health check programme. Almost 3 million NHS health check offers were made in 2014-15 and almost 1.5 million appointments taken up. That is vital for first awareness and my constituency knows how important early diagnosis can be as a result of the checks carried out by Silver Star when it visited us.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about other important referral routes, including engagement with pharmacists, and I will pass on his concerns to the Minister for
Community and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who has responsibility for community pharmacies.

The right hon. Gentleman criticised the responsibility deal, but I think it has achieved a lot. We have made some important gains working in voluntary partnership with industry, such as the voluntary front-of-pack nutritional labelling scheme, which has greatly empowered consumers to know what is in their food. That accounts for about two thirds of the market for pre-packed food and drinks, but I accept that the challenge is to go further.

We will announce more about our childhood obesity strategy this summer. We will also monitor the impact of NHS England’s proposal for the introduction of a sugar tax on the NHS estate. It will be interesting to see the results of that consultation. The Sugar Smart app has empowered 1.6 million consumers to date to know more about what is in their food.

I thank the right hon. Gentleman again for bringing these important issues to the House. I am absolutely sure that we will discuss them again, because this vital agenda is right at the heart of the Government’s health programme.

5.30 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).
Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In Treasury questions on Tuesday, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), the Chancellor of the Exchequer cited the recent report by the Public Accounts Committee on corporate tax as having given Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs a “clean bill of health” with regard to the tax settlement with Google. That is, in fact, wrong. I could not believe it at the time, because I could not believe that the Chancellor could have made such a mistake, but I have checked the record. In contrast to what the Chancellor said, the Committee raised a number of concerns about the settlement and said that we could not conclude whether it was a fair deal. It was a “don’t know”, rather than a clean bill of health.

I am concerned that a senior Cabinet Minister could have cited a cross-party report of a Committee of this House so wrongly. I seek your advice, Mr Speaker, on how to make sure that this sort of thing does not happen again.

Mr Speaker: Preventing recurrence is very difficult in the House of Commons, and I am not sure that the Chair, any more than anyone else, can commit to that. The hon. Lady has taken the opportunity to correct the record from her vantage point and that of the Committee which she chairs. That fact will be communicated to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and it is for him to decide whether, in the circumstances, he wishes to say anything on the matter. If he does, so be it. If he does not, knowing the hon. Lady as I do, I have a sense that she will use the resources available to her to draw attention to the matter.

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

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PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

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Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This is a little Bill—actually, it is a little littler than when it went into Committee—that will amend provisions for the House of Commons Members’ Fund. I extend my thanks to the numerous hon. Members, especially the trustees, and the Minister, who have supported the Bill through its various stages. I also thank the various officials who have supported it, including the actuary who helped my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) and me to enable a distinct change to be made that will free the fund from the Treasury or, to put it another way, free the Treasury from the fund.

I suspect that few Members who are not trustees will be aware of the fund, apart from through the note about a small deduction on their monthly payslip from the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. The fund was established before the second world war, when there was no parliamentary pension to help former Members who had fallen into financial difficulties. It was used to top up pensions for the widows of Members who had left the House when widows received a lower entitlement, and has been used for a few isolated cases of hardship among former Members.

As the House will recognise from that description, as time has passed, the demand has dropped. In the last financial year the payments worked out at £137,000, but over the years the fund has grown to a considerable sum of approximately £6.5 million. At present, the fund is drawn from compulsory contributions from Members, earnings from its investments and an annual contribution from the Treasury of £215,000.

Thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch, the Treasury contribution will cease. That follows a suggestion that he made to that end. An actuarial estimate of the fund was undertaken, and hence his amendments were accepted in Committee. They will remove the requirement for the Treasury to donate to the fund.

The Bill will remove the requirement under the existing primary legislation for Members to make monthly contributions of £2. In effect, the trustees will be empowered to cease deducting contributions. Given the figures I have just stated, I suspect that they intend to do so immediately following Royal Assent, since the fund has, to put it simply, a considerable surplus. However, the Bill enables the trustees to recommend the resumption of contributions, if it is needed, up to a maximum of 0.2% of pay. The trustees may, if they wish, return any surplus funds to the Treasury. The trustees have requested that discretion.

The Bill will permit the acceptance of bequests and allow the trustees to make arrangements under which a commercial institution would undertake the commitments and/or liabilities of the fund. The Bill will extend the class of beneficiaries to all dependants of former Members who experience severe hardship.
The Bill will also remove the requirement for trustees to be current MPs. I am sure the House will agree that it seems sensible for the trustees to ask, for example, the Association of Former Members of Parliament to nominate one trustee. In addition, this provision will enable the trustees to get over the problem that arises when a number of Members who are trustees lose or vacate their seats at a general election. The Bill will allow such former MPs to remain as trustees temporarily, until they are replaced formally.

As I have said, this is a little Bill that tidies up the arrangements for the trustees in today’s world. I commend it to the House.

9.39 am

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his generous comments and for accepting the amendments that I tabled in Committee. Often, one can make only modest achievements in this House, but if this Bill has saved £250,000 of Treasury money and will in future enable Members not to have to pay £2 a month, that will put into perspective the contribution made by my hon. Friend in promoting this Bill and including the necessary amendments. I hope that it will continue its passage without further ado.

9.40 am

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson): I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) appreciates expediency in these proceedings, so I will keep my comments fairly brief. I congratulate him on promoting this Bill. It was introduced as a 10-minute rule Bill—

Mr Speaker: Order. I would not wish to misunderstand the Minister. Was “expedience” the word for which he was looking?

Mr Wilson: No, it was “expediency”. I am used to having my grammar and English corrected, so I will take that as another correction.

This Bill was introduced by a 10-minute rule on 4 November. My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley made the point that it is not a Government Bill nor a Government handout Bill; it is a minor House of Commons management Bill. However, I am pleased to support it. The Bill is not new; two similar private Members’ Bills in the last Parliament fell owing to lack of time.

The Bill received its Second Reading on 29 January, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) for the huge contribution made by my hon. Friend in promoting this Bill and including the necessary amendments. I hope that it will continue its passage without further ado.

The Bill will remove the need for an annual contribution from the Exchequer while leaving sufficient funds to finance help to former Members and their dependants in future years. The fund was established under the House of Commons Members’ Fund Act 1939, predating the pension scheme for MPs that was established in 1964. Its original purpose was to provide former Members, their widows or widowers and orphan children, with a discretionary grant in lieu of a pension. Further Acts were passed in 1948, 1981 and 1991 to allow former Members and their dependants to apply for assistance, particularly in financial hardship. Those amendments also broadened the class of beneficiaries, granted wide powers of discretion to trustees, and established periodic payments to specific classes of beneficiaries. As a consequence, provision was made in 1981 for the fund to be supplemented by a higher annual Exchequer contribution.

The House of Commons Members’ Fund was established when there was no parliamentary pension, to help former Members and their dependants who had financial difficulties. Only 12 of those beneficiaries remain. In addition, the fund makes payments to top-up pensions for widows of Members up to five-eighths of their spouse’s pension for those who left the House when widows received a lower pension entitlement. There are 27 people in that category today. Numbers of beneficiaries in those two categories are decreasing.

The largest category of former Members and their dependants for whom there is likely to remain an ongoing need are those who left the House more recently and have fallen into need because of sickness, disability, or inability to return to work after losing their seat. A small number of such cases occur each year. The fund is able to award one-off grants or ongoing help on a discretionary basis. A report on the fund was sponsored jointly by the Members Estimate Audit Committee and the trustees in 2006-07. Both bodies shared a concern about the complexity of the fund’s governing legislation and consequential financial arrangements. A final report was produced by John Stoker and Lord Burnett in April 2007, outlining their recommendations for the fund.

The main recommendations were that the fund be divided into two distinct functions: first to provide a benevolent function—the payment of one-off hardship grants—and that function would be overseen by the trustees, with assets sufficient to meet likely future hardship payments; and, secondly to meet annual “as of rights” payments. The balance of the fund not required to finance the benevolent function would be repatriated. In practice, the Treasury, the House, or some other body would have to take responsibility for the payment function. In addition, the annual Exchequer grant of £215,000 would no longer be paid into the fund.
Following the review, the Members Estimate Committee considered the recommendations at its meeting in November 2007 and endorsed the report. During discussions that took place after the MEC meeting with the officials of the Leader of the House, a number of obstacles were identified. In particular, there were problems identifying a suitable Department to take on the annual regular grants to enable the fund’s two functions to be separated, to ensure that no further Treasury contributions would be taken and to return excess funds to the Treasury. Legislation is required to split the fund’s functions. The Leader of the House and the trustees have explored restructuring the fund through new primary legislation, but it has been difficult to find Government time for a stand-alone Bill. Until now there has been no opportunity to change the legislation.

Despite general agreement by all parties that the fund should be restructured, in the absence of new legislation the trustees have continued to administer the fund in its existing form. However, the trustees agreed that they would draw a lower annual Treasury contribution to cover the regular annual grants only. From 1 October 2011, £148,000 was drawn, rather than the maximum of £215,000, and from 1 January 2015 the trustees ceased the draw-down altogether. Once the legislation governing the fund has been reformed, the trustees intend to return £2 million to the Treasury, and there will be no provision for an annual Exchequer contribution to the fund.

Since the review in 2007, the trustees have explored a number of avenues to change the fund’s governing legislation. That has included attempts to obtain time on the Floor of the House for a stand-alone Bill, and using other legislative vehicles to make changes, such as the Public Service Pensions Bill and the Finance Bill. The trustees have decided to pursue a private Member’s Bill, with Government support.

The changes proposed are largely technical and will simplify the fund and the associated administrative burden. Those changes will make the fund easier to administer, and allow trustees to spend time on the main thrust of the fund, which is to assist former Members and their dependants in financial need. There is nothing more for me to say, other than that I wish this short and effective Bill swift progress through the Lords.

9.48 am

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I join this debate as parliamentary private secretary to the shadow Leader of the House. I am less familiar with the history of the fund than the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), who has done so much to promote this Bill. The shadow Leader of the House is in his constituency in Wales, and the shadow Deputy Leader of the House is in Great Grimsby, and they are working hard for their constituents. They have provided me with the opportunity and pleasure to speak for my party from the Front Bench for the first time, in what has been an exciting parliamentary week for me and included my first question to the Prime Minister. For a relative newbie, it has been a busy week. I hope it is not too long before I get the chance to speak for my party from the Government Front Bench.

In Committee, my shadow Front-Bench colleagues made it clear that Her Majesty’s Opposition have no objections to the aims and principles behind the Bill. The contributory nature of the fund is very welcome, as is the desire to enhance the scheme’s flexibility. I would like to take this opportunity to echo the thanks of the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), and the thanks of other Members, to the trustees for their administration and management of the fund. I welcome the chance to expand the pool of expertise the trust can call on, including from former Members or another representative of potential beneficiaries.

The shadow Deputy Leader of the House and other colleagues raised several concerns and sought clarification on a number of issues that went unanswered or have been left unaddressed. The issues raised included the fund’s future accountability and the potential to amalgamate the administration of Members’ funds. Given the constituency of the shadow Deputy Leader of the House—the world’s largest fishing port no less—I promised to do my best to weav in a fish or seafood pun or two, so here goes nothing.

Despite my hon. Friend’s best efforts to “winkle” information out of the hon. Member for Mole Valley and Ministers, the Government appeared to “clam” up in Committee and were prepared to “skate” over some of the issues involved. We will not stand for it. We have had enough of Ministers who refuse to answer questions in this “plaice”. [Interruption.] The money involved here is not tiny. The “tuna several million squid”—I do apologise—is involved; according to the House of Commons Library briefing, some £7 million. Members deserve appropriate answers, given the sum of money involved.

Our role in opposition is to hold the Government to account and to scrutinise them as effectively as possible however much they try to undermine our ability to do so, for example through the plans to reduce Short money. Some improvements have been made, as Members have had time to “mullet” over further. However, no answer has yet been provided on the amalgamation issue, which has now simply been removed from the face of the Bill. This is a “red herring” to distract those who recognised the benefit of a potential merger and were willing to explore the option at a later stage. I hope answers will be provided today in respect of the dogged pursuit of the issue in Committee by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). The latter has expressed concern that the Bill could represent a missed opportunity if the issue is now lost or ignored. The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons would not explain the Government’s position or thinking on this issue in Committee. Perhaps the Cabinet Office Minister will be more forthcoming.

There are three remaining areas of concern, focused on the accountability of the fund as it moves forward: on transparency, it would be useful to know more about how accessible information will be on the fund’s more flexible use and investments; on monitoring, it would be helpful to indicate how the fund’s use, especially any new uses, will be able to be scrutinised and inspected, and who by; and, on reporting, a little more information on how often reports will be provided, how they will be lodged and whether there will be any ability for Members to query reports, would be very welcome. I hope the hon. Member for Mole Valley and Ministers will throw some light on these issues, but I conclude by stating that...
Opposition Members do recognise the length of time it has taken to get to this point and the potential of the Bill to move things forward. I hope we see progress today.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I, too, want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on bringing the Bill before the House. Conscious as I am of the fact that driving instructors all over the country will be waiting for us to move on to the next business, I just want to make one short point that I am sure will be entirely pun-free.

It occurs to me that the setting up and establishment of the fund was an early example of what may be described in modern parlance as the big society: people taking care of their own without being forced to do so. Members have the privilege of being able to pass legislation, but it was essentially a voluntary act by Members to look after their own. As has been said, the fund has been taken over by events. With the advent of parliamentary pensions, it has largely fallen into disuse. Nevertheless, I am sure Members on both sides of the House will be glad of the extra £24 a year and I am sure the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be glad of the extra couple of million pounds being returned to the Treasury coffers.

I wish the Bill well this morning and in the other place.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Is my hon. Friend able to give some idea of how many driving instructors will be able to benefit from the measures in the Bill?

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I beg to move, that the Bill be now read the Third time.

I wish to thank hon. Members for their support for this measure. Indeed, in Committee such was the enthusiasm of colleagues that some who turned up were not even members of the Committee. I am very grateful to all those who did turn up.

In early January this year, I received an email from a constituent of mine who runs a driving school that employs about 200 drivers. He was concerned that his business and his customers were suffering from a lack of qualified driving instructors. I agree with my constituent, although I have to say that I have now received a few letters and emails from people throughout the country telling me that there is an excess of driving instructors. Perhaps we will not delay the House with that argument, because it does not relate to the core of the Bill.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Is my hon. Friend able to give some idea of how many driving instructors will be able to benefit from the measures in the Bill?

Sir David Amess: I am happy to write to my hon. Friend to give him the precise details. Suffice it to say, it is a considerable number.

My constituent felt that this was a nationwide problem and asked if it would be possible to make the process of requalifying simpler for instructors who had, for whatever reason, been forced to take a break from instructing. He told me that many instructors who had left the register of qualified instructors for medical reasons—maternity leave, or to help care for a sick or elderly relative—found the process of requalifying too costly and time consuming to make it an attractive prospect. I imagine there can be occasions where driving instruction is rather stressful given some of the people they are trying to instruct, but it is not a physically taxing profession and it has great appeal to more mature, experienced instructors who can continue to instruct at the highest level for many years. I hope the Bill will go some way towards addressing my constituent’s concerns and assist many experienced instructors, who have much to give back to the profession, to return to the industry.

The Bill ensures that approved driving instructors are allowed re-entry to the register under a simplified procedure if they apply within four years of leaving by undergoing a standards check that is quite rigorous. For clarification, driving instructors are registered for four years. During that four-year period, they must successfully pass a standards check that assesses their continued ability to provide instruction during their registration period. This is known as a “continued ability and fitness check”.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Bill will not do anything to weaken the rigorous standards we have for driving instructors?
Sir David Amess: I can absolutely confirm that to my hon. Friend. Indeed, I was challenged on that point in Committee. It will not diminish in any sense the very high standards we rightly require for those who instruct people how to drive.

If they pass the check, their registration can be extended for another four years. If they fail the check they are usually allowed another go, but they will be removed from the register if they do not pass. An instructor can also be removed for disciplinary reasons, for example for refusing to undergo a standards check, or for conduct or health reasons that mean they may not be fit to deliver instruction.

The Bill allows a driving instructor to request voluntary removal from the register and to return at a later date under the simplified process. As reported in Committee, last year more than 600 ADIs asked to be removed from the register, something most people would assume is a straightforward task. However, those ADIs were not allowed to be removed voluntarily. They had to be removed for disciplinary reasons by refusing a standards check, or they had to undergo a check and then let their registration expire at the end of the four-year period.

The reasons for ADIs wanting to leave the register are varied, but it is generally because they would like a break from the profession to start a family, as in a recent case where a female ADI felt compelled to renew her registration, despite taking a career break from delivering driving instruction to bring up her two young children. If she had not renewed the registration at a cost of £300, it would have lapsed, which seems very unfair. She would then have had to undergo the three-year requalification process, which takes 34 weeks on average. The ADI felt that this was discriminatory, and I certainly agree. She would have preferred leaving the register voluntarily and then returning at a later date via the simplified route.

A further example of how ADIs might benefit from the Bill is where an ADI is undergoing long-term medical treatment, and while receiving treatment does not feel well enough to continue working, but would afterwards be able to return to their profession without the stress of having to requalify. The Bill will work to benefit instructors, as with a recent ADI who allowed his registration to lapse due to a heart attack. At the end of the 12-month period in which he could re-register without requalifying, the ADI felt that this was discriminatory, and I certainly agree. She would have preferred leaving the register voluntarily and then returning at a later date via the simplified route.

In promoting the Bill, I do not seek to compromise standards of instruction—this was the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray)—because the standards check carried out to ensure the ADI’s continued ability to instruct will be the same check that is carried out on practising instructors on the register. I am, however, seeking to make the legislation more proportionate and fair, making it more relevant to the 21st century by making two simple deregulatory changes. This certainly pleases Conservative Members and fits in with the Government’s commitment to removing unnecessary burdens, especially for small businesses, which make up the majority of the ADI industry.

I am delighted to see in his place the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who will no doubt respond to the debate in due course. He made his debut as a Minister in Committee, and I am advised that if we are successful with this Bill, it will be the one and only piece of legislation that the Department for Transport has piloted in this parliamentary Session. I commend the Bill to the House.

10.3 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) on his remarkable success in getting the Bill this far. He has steered it very well. He mentioned the Committee stage, which managed to last an entire 14 minutes. Approval for the ideas he brings forward is very clear, and I hope to see the Bill making it on to the statute book shortly. The Government support the Bill.

I shall be relatively brief and expeditious. Let me first confirm that, in my view, the provisions of the Driving Instructors (Registration) Bill are compatible with the European convention on human rights. Thanks to the great efforts of my hon. Friend, we are now aware that paid driving instruction in Great Britain has been regulated for many years—in fact, since the 1960s. It is therefore unlawful for a person to carry out paid driving instruction unless they are registered as an “approved driving instructor”, commonly known as an ADI. To become a qualified ADI, an instructor must take and pass a three-stage process. There is a purpose to the legislation, which is to ensure that an instructor is sufficiently qualified to deliver a robust standard of instruction to learner drivers and, through that, help to preserve road safety by making sure they become safe and responsible drivers.

The regime to control the process is proportionate. We need look only at our country’s record on road safety to see the contribution that ADIs have made; indeed, other countries look at our record with some envy and have sought to replicate our system. As my hon. Friend made clear in Committee, however, some of the legislation is out of date and due for a change. That, of course, is why we are here today.

My hon. Friend has identified two quite simple changes that can be made to the legislation to bring it up to date and make it more reflective of current work practices, without compromising instructor standards. As he has pointed out, driving instructors are primarily small businesses, often operating individually or perhaps as part of a smaller franchise arrangement. These simple provisions will provide benefits of a deregulatory nature for a group of small businesses, which is entirely in keeping with the Government’s intention to remove barriers to business.
The two ideas are quite straightforward. The first is to help people back into the industry through the removal of the requirement to redo their full three-part qualification. Last year, 2,500 ADIs allowed their registration to lapse, but only 1%—just 25—applied to requalify. I am sure that, had the requalification process been simpler, more would have tried to re-enter the industry. The requalification process will be reduced from a 34-week process to a six-week one, which is a very significant change.

The second idea relates to voluntary removal from the register and then re-entering via the updated, simplified procedure. Last year, 610 ADIs asked to be removed from the register because they had other commitments. The registrar cannot, however, legally do that because ADIs can be removed only for reasons relating to conduct, competence or discipline. If someone is taking a career break to be a carer or to bring up a family, having one’s competence challenged or being made subject to a disciplinary procedure seems entirely unfair. It does not reflect what is happening in people’s lives or careers, which is why we need to make the change.

As the Minister with responsibility for road safety, I am reassured that the Bill will not lower standards and will not compromise road safety; it will merely simplify access to the profession.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I did not have the opportunity to ask this question earlier, so I would like to ask the Minister now. Clause 5 enables the Secretary of State to use regulations made by statutory instrument to “make such provision as the Secretary of State considers appropriate in consequence of this Act.” That sounds rather broad, so will the Minister clarify the circumstances in which the provision might be used?

Andrew Jones: Yes, I think the clause provides consequential amendments to flow through the idea and basic concepts of deregulation and ease of process through other aspects of parliamentary business, as required. It is quite straightforward and does not change things; it simply follows it all through. If I am wrong, I will of course write to the hon. Lady, but that is certainly my reading of the clause.

We have two simple measures in front of us this morning, which will provide flexibility and financial benefits for the industry. I am very pleased to give the Government’s support to the Bill, and I hope that it receives a Third Reading.
Illegal Immigrants (Criminal Sanctions) Bill

Second Reading

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. In view of the hon. Gentleman’s preference for expedition rather than, of course, expediency, he will be delighted that we have reached his Bill in such an orderly way, and without undue delay.

10.10 am

Mr Chope: I am indeed so delighted, Mr Speaker, and I beg to move that the Bill be now read a Second time. In so doing, I thank the sponsors of the Bill, my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), for Shipley (Philip Davies), for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), and for Kettering (Mr Hollobone). I am delighted to see that some other colleagues are present and clearly intend to involve themselves in this important debate.

The Bill provides for criminal sanctions against two categories of offender: those who enter, or attempt to enter, the United Kingdom without legal authority, and those who are present in the United Kingdom after 1 July 2016 without legal authority. Clause 2 sets out the penalties for those offences: a fine or a maximum prison sentence of six months, and—this is important—a deportation order, which would take effect unless the Home Secretary deemed it to be against the public interest.

I have raised this issue with the Immigration Minister on several occasions, most recently when attempting to add a new clause to the Immigration Bill on Report on 1 December 2015. The Minister told me then that new criminal sanctions were not “necessary or appropriate”. He said:

“there are already criminal sanctions and removal…powers in place…Section 24 of the Immigration Act 1971 in particular sets out criminal sanctions for various types of unlawful migrant behaviour, including illegal entry and overstaying.”

That is, of course, absolutely correct, but my response to the Minister then—and it is the same today—was that in the last year for which figures were available, “there were only 72 convictions in magistrates and Crown courts for all the offences mentioned in section 24”.—[Official Report, 1 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 230.]

Having been challenged on that point, the Minister went on to explain that the purpose was not to prosecute people, saying:

“Our primary sanctions for immigration non-compliance are removal and civil penalties, which is why, in many respects, prosecution numbers are relatively low.”—[Official Report, 1 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 253.]

What an understatement “relatively low” was! There are fewer than two prosecutions a week for illegal immigration, although we can see on our television screens exactly what is happening just across the channel. Attempts, many of which are successful, are being made every day by hundreds of illegal migrants.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is not a fact that, in the last year for which figures are available, 40,000 people left voluntarily, and that the number has increased by 30% in recent years? It is not all doom and gloom. There is reason to believe that the imperative to recognise their illegal status has led several thousand people to leave the country.

Mr Chope: It is hard to establish the exact basis on which those people left voluntarily. I know that the figures given by my hon. Friend have been cited before, and the number does seem to have risen, but I think that the people about whom we are concerned are those who are staying here deliberately, in breach of the law, as illegal migrants. I shall give some examples shortly. People who leave voluntarily are often those who have overstayed and want an opportunity to make a fresh application from overseas without being caught out. They tend—in my constituency case experience, at least—to be good people who have been caught out by the existing rules and who want, as soon as possible, to rectify their legal position, and to be able to return to the country and remain here legally. What concerns me, and what the Bill aims to address, is the very large number of people—there are probably well over a million now—who are here illegally, are intent on staying here illegally, and every now and again ask for some sort of amnesty which would enable them to be legitimised.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Do I understand that my hon. Friend would like to see a fast-track process to extradite people who are staying here illegally?

Mr Chope: I would indeed like to see such a process, but for deportation rather than extradition. The Bill specifically states that if illegal migrants are convicted, the courts should recommend deportation as a matter of course, but that is, at present, very much the exception. As a consequence, as soon as people arrive in this country—although they may have come here by means of subterfuge, with false documents and so on—they think that if they are caught, they will effectively never be deported.

We know that, currently, a mass—tens of thousands—of what are described as failed asylum seekers are in this country, and have not been deported. The figures, which I have somewhere, suggest that the number of deportations of failed asylum seekers is at a 10-year low, yet we know that the number of people seeking asylum last year was at a record high. Why are so few of those people being deported? I think that it is because the Government are not taking seriously the need to deter, and to enforce the existing law in the 1971 Act. Given those figures relating to failed asylum seekers, how can the Government say that their focus is on “removal…rather than prosecution”, because removal is less quick and less costly? The facts do not seem to bear that out.

So what are the facts? We know that of those who have come here illegally, fewer were subjected to enforced removal last year than in any of the previous 12 years for which we have statistics. In 2004, 21,425 people were subjected to enforced removal, under a Labour Government. My hon. Friends often say that during that period, the Labour Government were a soft touch when it came to illegal migrants. I see that the Minister is nodding. Last year only 12,056 people were subjected to enforced removal, the lowest number for 12 years.
The Government sometimes arrange what are known as “assisted voluntary returns”, which often means the provision of an air fare to enable people to leave. The number of assisted voluntary returns last year was also at its lowest level for 12 years, at just 1,635. That information comes from the most recently published Home Office immigration statistics, relating to 2015.

Public anxiety about illegal immigration is at an all-time high, but the Government’s effectiveness in tackling it is, in my submission, at an all-time low. There are scarcely any prosecutions and the number of enforced removals has been substantially reduced. In the face of these facts, what are the Government doing? As recently as Monday this week, the noble Lord Bates, the Home Office Minister of State—

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): A great man.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend says that he is a great man, and I am sure he is. His time in this House happened to coincide with a time when I was not a Member of Parliament, so I do not know him very well. In the other place on Monday, he said in answer to a question from another great man, whom I do know, Lord Green of Deddington, that “the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and others have been working hard…to increase the discomfort for those who are in this country illegally.”

What an extraordinary use of words—

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Discomfort!

Mr Chope: Discomfort! What did the Minister have in mind when he referred to discomfort? Perhaps the Under-Secretary of State for Refugees, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), who is in on the Front Bench today, will be able to explain what was meant by that term. It suggests someone who might have a mild medical condition.

Equally inadequate was Lord Bates’ reply when he was asked “what difference do the Government estimate that the Prime Minister’s so-called EU reforms will make to the figures”? Lord Green had stated earlier that migration levels could lead to “an increase in our population of half a million every year, of which 75% will be due to future immigration”. The Minister, Lord Bates, accepted that Lord Green had been correct in saying that if you use the statistical data available to forecast, you arrive at roughly the numbers he referred to.

He accepted the premise of the question, but when he was asked what the effect would be of the so-called reforms that the Prime Minister came back with following the renegotiations, he said:

“Of course, we must see what effect they will have, going forward.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 29 February 2016; Vol. 769, c. 576;]

If that is not an imprecise statement on what are being bandied around as essentially good reforms that will transform the status of our relationship with the European Union, I do not know what is. It is an extraordinarily vague response to a very precise question. The Government keep saying that our relationship with the European Union will be debated on the facts, but they cannot even bring any facts to bear in answer to that precise question.

The whole purpose of the Bill is to reduce illegal immigration by identifying, prosecuting and deporting those already here illegally and deterring others who might be planning to come here illegally. How big is the problem that the Bill seeks to address? The Government have very little idea how many foreign nationals are in this country illegally, or so they say. They certainly refuse to gather any data to inform the debate, because of the embarrassment that that would cause. I have some figures that have been produced by the House of Commons Library, and they basically show that the Government have no idea how many illegal migrants there are here. The most recent studies are more than 10 years old, but the figure then was in a range between 300,000 and 700,000. That was 10 years ago, so what would the figure be now? In my submission, it must be well in excess of 1 million.

Mr Nuttall: Does my hon. Friend agree that, given the Government’s trumpeting of the now more widespread use of exit checks, it ought to be relatively simple to ascertain the number of illegals who are in this country by looking at how many have been identified by the exit checks as having left the country and who the records show were not even supposed to be here in the first place?

Mr Chope: That is a very intelligent suggestion, and I wish I had thought of it. I hope that the Minister will take it on board. Many other straws have been put into the wind to try to work out what is happening, but my hon. Friend’s suggestion would provide a good way forward. It would give us at least some idea of the figures. One of the problems is that many of the people who are already here illegally do not have any documents. They do not have passports, so I am not sure that they would wish to exit the country using authorised routes. Notwithstanding that problem, however, there is a lot in what my hon. Friend has said.

Whatever the number of illegal immigrants in this country might be, they are certainly continuing to arrive in record numbers. We know that 1.1 million came into the European Union last year. In January 2016, the rate at which people were crossing the Aegean and arriving in Greece from Turkey was around 1,300 a day, compared with around 1,300 in the whole of the month of January in 2015. The numbers are increasing exponentially. I had the opportunity to see this with my own eyes on the isle of Kos last October, and I could see that this was a really big business being organised by criminal gangs across Europe and beyond.

This brings me to the report published last month by Europol entitled “Migrant smuggling in the EU”. The report points to the fact that many more than 100,000 migrants entered the United Kingdom illegally last year. It does not give a precise figure, but the implication is that the figure was higher than 100,000. It also states that more than 900,000 of the 1 million migrants who entered the EU last year used the services of criminal groups of people smugglers who were heavily connected to organised crime. It identifies the UK, Germany and Sweden as the three preferred destination countries and makes it clear that almost all migrants eventually reach
their chosen destination, undertaking what the report describes as “secondary movements”. London and Calais are identified as being among the “main criminal hotspots for intra-EU movements”.

The Europol report refers to the main countries in which suspects operate. It states that criminal suspects born in Bulgaria, Hungary, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, Syria and Turkey concentrate a high proportion of their activities in the United Kingdom. It refers to document counterfeiting having increased significantly, to corruption being rife and to migrant smuggling routes and networks being used to infiltrate potential terrorists, which we know sadly happened during the Paris attacks last November.

The report states that the EU needs to be firm with those who do not need protection, who pose a security risk or who refuse to co-operate with the asylum process. However, we know that that is not happening at all. We now have a system of hotspots that is designed to ensure the rapid return of those without a legitimate asylum case, but again that is not happening.

Another indication of the number of people who may be here illegally came in December 2013, when, following a claim in 2010 that the Government did not have any information on this matter, the Government issued the publication, “Sustaining services, ensuring fairness: Government response to the consultation on migrant access and their financial contribution to NHS provision in England”.

Just as a side issue, let me say that we saw in the papers yesterday that there is a great imbalance between the amount of money that our country pays out to EU countries in respect of the healthcare of British citizens in Europe compared with the amount that we charge European citizens using our health service here.

The NHS document suggested that, at any one time in England, there are about 2.5 million overseas visitors and migrants, of whom 450,000 are from the European economic area, and about 580,000 are irregulars, who include failed asylum seekers liable to removal, people who have overstayed their visas and illegal migrants. Even back then—in 2013—the health service statistics suggested that there were the best part of 600,000 people here.

Earlier today, courtesy of the Mail Online, I listened to what the Home Secretary said to the Conservative party conference in 2014 about the determination of herself and the Government to reduce the number of appeal rights and the number of appeals by foreign criminals against removal from our country. At that stage, she said that there were 70,000 appeals and that she would halve that number by reducing the number of appeal rights from 17 to four. She rightly referred to the abuse of article 8 and the emphasis on foreign criminals and illegal immigrants trying to rely on family connections. At the outset of her speech, she said that she was going to extend the number of “deport first, hear appeals later” cases.

It was with some dismay that I read, on 28 February, in the Mail on Sunday that a Romanian rapist, who had been removed from Britain, had been allowed back in by judges who ruled that his deportation broke EU law and breached his human rights. This was a person who had been convicted in Romania of rape. He had come to this country illegally, stayed in this country illegally and then, when the rules changed for Romania to join the European Union, he was able to stay here as an EU citizen. The Government have always said that they wish to maintain control of our borders so that we do not have to tolerate criminals from the rest of the EU in our country. It only came to light that that person had a criminal record in Romania when he was convicted of a drink-drive offence. Even in a case as strong as that, the courts have intervened to prevent him from being deported from this country.

The same article refers to another case in which a violent Slovakian sent home under the deport first rule had won the right to return to the United Kingdom for his appeal hearing. The Upper Tribunal ruled that it was unlawful for the Home Office to refuse Roman Kasicky permission on security grounds. The Home Office had said:

“The UK will seek to deport any EU national whose conduct represents a genuine, present and sufficiently serious threat.”

The only problem is that, under our present arrangements with the European Union, we are incapable of being able to deliver on that intent. The only way, in my submission, that we will ever be able to deliver on it is by leaving the European Union, and that is increasingly the conclusion to which people are coming.

In 2014, the Prime Minister said that he recognised that this was a really serious issue, that we needed to take control of our borders, that we needed to reduce the levels of migration to the tens of thousands and that he was going to secure that through fundamental reform of the European Union. There has not been fundamental reform of the European Union; in fact there has been no reform at all. What has happened is that we have a very modest reform of our relationship with the European Union, subject to all the provisos about enforceability and the supremacy of the European Court of Justice.

Without fundamental reform, we cannot do anything about these illegal people from the European Union, as exemplified by the case to which I have just referred.

My Bill would cover not just those from the European Union, but illegal migrants more generally. If there are 1 million-plus illegal migrants in this country at the moment, this Bill would enable the Government to get to grips with the matter and to get the authorities working on it. If we got tough with illegal migrants in our country, the people smugglers would divert them away from the United Kingdom, as they always try to use the weakest points of entry. Apart from the weakness of our enforcement and detection procedures, one of the perverse incentives for people to come to the United Kingdom is that we do not have a requirement that people should have identity cards. I do not think that we should have such a requirement, but the fact that we do not have it means that people who are illegal migrants can lie low here for years and years and we do not know anything about them. They come to light only when they are convicted of an offence, and by then we are told that they have been here for too long and we cannot get rid of them.

This is a mega crisis in immigration. I proposed this Bill more in hope than in expectation. None the less, I hope that, at the very least, the Minister will have the opportunity to explain how, if the people decide to stay in the European Union on 23 June, all these serious issues will be sorted out.
Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Sir Winston Churchill once said:

“We have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not combined. We are interested and associated but not absorbed...If Britain must choose between Europe and the open sea, she must always choose the open sea.”

The open sea between Calais and Dover is the subject of this debate. Traditionally, the sea has been an opportunity for us British people to take our values across the world. The sea has never really been seen as a threat to this island nation, except in terms of armed conflict. There is a different threat now, which is why the Bill, albeit only a private Member’s Bill, is very apposite. It is important that we debate it and that the Government take these arguments seriously and reply to them, because, frankly, in terms of illegal entry into this country, the system is out of control. There is widespread public disquiet about that. It is not good for the reputation of this Government, or any Government. It is not good for relations between different communities. It is not good for respect for the system of law.

People cannot understand why there are no consequences for causing massive, criminal disruption. If someone decides illegally to enter the channel tunnel, which is a dangerous thing to do in any circumstances, and they cause massive disruption, delaying train after train, delaying hundreds of people going on holiday or returning, or, even more important, preventing people from getting to business appointments, and if someone actually walks through the entire length of the channel tunnel, what people cannot understand is why, when they are caught, having caused that massive, criminal disruption, there apparently are no consequences. They are not even returned, it seems, to France. It brings the whole system of law into disrepute. It is not good for our relations with France either, but I will deal with that in a moment.

A constituent, Mr Denby, runs a very successful haulage business, which he built up from nothing. He is an entrepreneur, creating jobs. Let us say that one of his lorries arrives in Lincoln, the back of it is opened, and out jump half a dozen illegal migrants, and Mr Denby rings the police. Are the migrants prosecuted? For all the trouble that they have caused, are they taken to court? Are they given, perhaps, a modest prison sentence but then deported? No. They are taken off to a comfortable hostel in Boston and they stay in this country forever. It is like a child’s game. People arrive in this country illegally. When they get to Dover, they shout “Home” and apparently there is nothing the police can do about it. The whole system is brought into disrepute.

If we were just talking about a few dozen, or even a few hundred people a year, we could perhaps live with it, but my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) mentioned the statistics and I shall mention a few as well. We are talking about potentially thousands of people, and the whole system being brought into disrepute. The Bill is particularly apposite because the whole issue of juxtaposed controls, by which someone can have their passport checked on the French side of the channel if they are trying to enter England, is front-page news today, given President Hollande’s remarks yesterday.

How extraordinary that the President of France, the President of a friendly country—everybody knows how francophone and francophile I am: there is no more francophile or francophone person in this House—should say that if the British people exercise their democratic right in a referendum to leave the EU there will “be consequences” in Calais. He did not actually mention Calais—I think he said he did not want to be too alarmist—but the interpretation of all his remarks is that if we were to leave the EU, he would move the borders.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend is far too modest. I want to place it on the record that he is a holder of the Légion d’honneur.

Sir Edward Leigh: It is very kind of my hon. Friend. I have devoted 30 years of my life to trying to improve relations between our country and France. We are the closest of allies. In two world wars, the blood of hundreds of thousands of British people was spilt, and it drained away in the precious soil of France to save their liberties. I think that is well recognised by French people. It is, in my view, not acceptable for a leader of a foreign country, particularly a friendly country, to say that if the people exercise a democratic right there will be consequences.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me for saying this, but surely that is exactly what he wants. Mr Hollande, the President of France, in announcing that there will be consequences, is merely stating a fact about leaving the European Union. My hon. Friend is seeking consequences, and they are some of the things he is referring to now, but there will be others as well, and that is why he is seeking to leave the EU.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is perfectly okay if these “consequences” are phrased in terms of a friendly question. Although it is not the subject of today’s debate, one friendly debate that we could have is on the question: if a country leaves the EU and wishes to access the single market, to what extent does that country have to take migrants? If the debate takes place under those circumstances, I take back entirely what I said, because that would be a friendly debate. But there is the possibility, especially given what the Prime Minister said a couple of weeks ago, that alarm bells are deliberately being rung, and Downing Street might indeed be orchestrating that. Some people say that it is right to ring these alarm bells, but there is a fear that our border will be thrown open.

We all know this is a toxic issue; it is pointless to deny that. It is far more toxic with the general public than arcane debates about the single market and business regulation, and even the sovereignty of Parliament. This is the important point—the consequences point—and it is desperately important for the referendum. If it is felt that anybody can walk across the continent, as they are in their tens of thousands, from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan—of course we sympathise individually with the desperate plight of these people—and can arrive in Calais, get on a cross-channel ferry, arrive in Dover and, because of the present state of the law, will not be returned, because apparently neither the Bill nor anything like it will be passed, there are indeed consequences.

I happen to think that the existing law has an entirely wrong-headed point of view on this issue. We have the treaty of Le Touquet. It is nothing to do with the EU. I do not think it would be in the interests of most
countries, and it would not surely be in the interests of France, to encourage more people to walk across France in the hope of getting to England. I believe that the treaty of Le Touquet would stand, but certainly it is a debate that we need to have. I believe also that it would stand anyway because, as I understand it—although I defer to the Minister, who deals with these issues every day and is presumably much more expert in the law—it is very difficult to enter the United Kingdom illegally on an aeroplane. Before boarding, your passport and ticket are checked, and if they are not in order you are not allowed to board.

Let us say we were to leave the EU—or even that there was no treaty of Le Touquet. Surely, before anyone was allowed on the channel tunnel train or the cross-channel ferry, the ticket collector would check their ticket and passport, and if they were invalid, would not let them board. I believe that the vague undertcurrent of threats of “consequences” in terms of law and practice is complete rubbish.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. Is it not correct that the carrier liability to which he refers does not apply to, for example, Eurotunnel, but it would need to apply to Eurotunnel, which has French majority ownership, and to the cross-channel ferries in the future in the same way as it currently applies to all airlines?

Sir Edward Leigh: Absolutely. I think that would be very simple to arrange, and it would be in the interests of both Governments. I do not think for one moment that France would abrogate the treaty of Le Touquet, first for the reason I have given, which is pure self-interest, and secondly because, as President Hollande kindly said—this is where I support what he said—we are close allies, and we would continue to be close allies even if Britain left the EU. It is inconceivable that the very first thing he would do would be the deeply unfriendly act of abrogating the treaty of Le Touquet. My hon. Friend makes the vital point about carrier liability, which seems to work extremely well for aeroplanes, and I cannot see why it should not work entirely properly and conveniently, and in a proper administrative way, for ferries and for the channel tunnel. That has dealt with that point.

[Interjection.] My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) laughs, but if he wishes to question my arguments—

Tom Tugendhat: I did not laugh.

Sir Edward Leigh: The point of these debates is to have a debate. If what I am saying is not right, it is incumbent on the Minister to explain why, because there is enormous public interest in this. It would be really helpful if the Minister, when he responds to the debate, said, “I listened to what my hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch and for Gainsborough said about carrier liability, the treaty of Le Touquet and all the other points, and the advice that we have received from Home Office officials is that this would not be a problem if we left the EU.” That would be a marvellous statement. We might not get it, but it is at least something to ask for.

Tom Tugendhat: Just for the record, I was not laughing; I was sneezing slightly. I merely want to ask a question on the treaty of Le Touquet and the implications for France. I know that my hon. Friend has done much to support Britain’s relationship with France—the French ambassador speaks very warmly of him—and he certainly recognises the enormous commitment that the French make to guarding Calais on behalf of the United Kingdom population, and how that distorts the work of the gendarmerie, who are effectively forced to take massive overtime over the whole of the nation in order to support that commitment. It creates a major distortion of policing across the whole nation. That burden is borne almost entirely by the French people. Yes, the UK makes a small contribution, but it would not be fair to say that there is no debate in France on this. Were my hon. Friend to read some of the statements in the Assemblée Nationale, or to read some of the commentary in Le Figaro and Le Monde, he would see that there is major pressure on the French Government to look again at the Le Touquet treaty.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a very fair point. There is enormous concern in France and enormous resentment in Calais. By the way, I pay tribute to the Mayor of Calais, who has done sterling work in this whole area. I sympathise deeply with the people of Calais and with the French Government, who have had to bear the cost. I sympathise with the poor gendarmerie, who this week have been under appalling attacks, not primarily from the migrants, who are decent people seeking a better life, but from anarchists who are there deliberately to provoke aggression. My hon. Friend is quite right about that.

Surely we have to ask why the “jungle” in Calais is there. It is there because those people believe that, in the absence of a Bill such as this, if only they can make it on to a train or hide away in a lorry or car, once they get to the United Kingdom they can cry “Home” and they will never be sent back.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that fundamentally those people are there because they are desperate, having fled war and persecution?

Sir Edward Leigh: Absolutely. Let me be completely clear that nobody in the House questions the desperate plight of the people now trudging through Greece and those who are held up at the border, having fled the appalling events in Syria, Iraq and Libya. By the way, the west has a huge responsibility for that, and I have to say that those Members who voted to invade Iraq, to bomb Libya and to bomb Syria also have a responsibility for the chaos that has ensued. Nobody questions the desperate plight of those people, but let us be completely honest about this. The hon. Gentleman has to be honest. Is he now suggesting that the British Government should say to the 6,000 people living in the jungle, “Yes, you are decent human beings who have come from appalling places with dreadful Governments and where there is chaos, such as Eritrea and Somalia, so you can come here”? If he wishes to make such a statement, he has to juxtapose himself on to the Government Front Bench and say, “Yes, I will let in those 6,000 people”, because tomorrow another 10,000 will come, and they day after 20,000.

Conor McGinn rose—

Sir Edward Leigh: Having questioned the hon. Gentleman, I had better give way to him.
Conor McGinn: That is not what I was saying. I had the privilege of hosting a group of young people from the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development in this House on Thursday. I said to them that when one looks at the images from Calais and the Mediterranean, one’s instinctive reaction—certainly it is mine—is that of a father, a brother and a son. We must introduce the language of compassion into this debate while absolutely understanding that tough decisions have to be made, and we must find a policy solution to it. That is the point I was making.

Sir Edward Leigh: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We have to introduce the language of compassion. May I just defend the Government for a moment? There is not a single Government in the whole of Europe who have spent more money on aid to Syria. This Government have a perfectly logical and reasonable point of view, which is that, rather than simply giving comfort to the people traffickers, we should take people directly from the camps. I think that there is widespread support on the Government Benches for what the Government are doing in that regard. If I have not spoken the language of compassion, let me be absolutely clear now that this debate is not about being nasty to people who are desperately seeking a better life.

Mr Nuttall: I accept that these people are desperate and fleeing persecution. If that is the case, why are they not seeking a safe haven in the first safe country they reach, rather than trying to get to the United Kingdom? Is that not the question we ought to be asking?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is the question that the public ask again and again in the letters and emails we receive. Why is the Dublin convention not being used? My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) was about the staggering level of net migration, at 300,000 a year. That is the question. I do want to ask about illegal immigration, rather than legal immigration, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale referred. That convention basically states, quite rightly, that a person should get asylum or be returned to the first country they enter, so this is what people in this country do not understand: is France unsafe? I quite understand—in the language of compassion—why a person would want to be an economic migrant, but are they an asylum seeker? When they are taken out of the back of a lorry in Lincoln or found at the first service station on the M3, they do not say to the English gendarmerie that they want to get benefits or a job; they say that they are an asylum seeker. The question that the British people are asking is this: if that person is a genuine asylum seeker, given that France is a completely safe and civilized country, with a very generous benefits system, why do they not claim asylum there? It all boils down to why this Bill is needed. I know that this is only a private Member’s Bill, but for the life of me I cannot understand why the Government do not take action on this.

David Morris: I pay homage to my hon. Friend for his prowess in this field. I would like to clarify the fact that people come from all over the world to Calais, where there is a bottleneck, in the hope of getting across the channel and claiming asylum, and they do so for one reason only: they perceive that life will be better here for themselves and their families. To be frank, I do not think anybody on the face of the planet, if they were in distress, would not do the same thing. They come to this country—I hope that my hon. Friend agrees with this—because, as has been said in this debate, the UK is a soft touch. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister has brought forward reforms to deflect people away from this country by cutting down the benefits and the perceived advantages?

Sir Edward Leigh: That may be a fair point. I do not think that Mr Deputy Speaker would want me to get into a whole debate about the Prime Minister’s renegotiation of benefits for Poles—people who have an absolute right to come here anyway. I briefly make the point that the overwhelming majority of Poles come here to work, not for benefits, but let us leave that to one side.

The people sitting in Calais are not Polish, Lithuanian or Hungarian—those people can all come in anyway. I am afraid that the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) is completely irrelevant. By definition, the people whom we are discussing are not allowed here. They come from outside the EU.

It is true that our benefit system is a draw. I am told that in the “jungle”, England is viewed as a kind of El Dorado—having lived here for 65 years, I have never thought of it as that. Apparently, it is the place where all one’s dreams come true—there are unlimited work and benefits, and all the rest of it. These people come from outside the EU, so I am afraid that my hon. Friend’s intervention was not relevant. The issue is entirely in the hands of the Government. We hear about the staggering level of net migration, at 300,000 a year. The whole of London and the south-east is groaning under the number of people, and that is a particular issue for native working class people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This debate is about illegal immigration. As Sir Edward pointed out, the intervention of the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) was about legal immigration. We need to get back to the relevant point.

Tom Tugendhat rose—

Sir Edward Leigh: I shall give way to my hon. Friend if he wants to ask me about illegal immigration, rather than legal immigration, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale referred.

Tom Tugendhat: I do want to ask about illegal immigration. I merely want to state on the record that I do consider this country to be an El Dorado and I do think that it is a sceptred isle set in a sapphire sea. I really do think that this is the best country in the world. We are a light on the hill and a beacon to the peoples of the world. I think there is a good reason why people do not stop on their way here; if I had the choice of coming to the UK rather than anywhere else, here is exactly where I would come and I am very proud that my family are here.

On a separate point, I should briefly say that, sadly, some of those attempting to enter through Calais are the interpreters from Afghanistan and Iraq, with whom I served and who served the United Kingdom armed forces with enormous courage and distinction. When
we consider this matter, we should realise that some of the people may have a rightful claim. We should be a
little more considerate, as I know my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) is being;
some voices, however, are becoming more strident.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** That is absolutely right. Some have put their lives on the line as interpreters for the British
Army in Afghanistan and some, God forbid, may be living in the jungle in a shack. The Minister could make a
good point about preventing illegal entry by people who put their lives at risk by trying to jump on a train. I do not
know what the procedures are; presumably, the people mentioned in my hon. Friend’s intervention could find a British immigration official and try to enter legally. My hon. Friend makes a good point.

My hon. Friend’s first point was very apposite too. Why are there all these attempts at illegal entry into the
UK? It is because getting a job in France is so difficult and joining the benefits system there is so complex. Those things are probably even more difficult in places such as Italy. That is why people will do anything and take any risk to try to jump on the train. I do not know what the procedures are; presumably, the people mentioned in my hon. Friend’s intervention could find a British immigration official and try to enter legally. My hon. Friend makes a good point.

If the Government took the steps that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch suggests, I hazard a
guess that the camp would dissolve. The whole issue would go away and our relations with France would
improve immeasurably. People would simply make a perfectly rational and good decision, asking themselves
what, if they knew that they were going to be caught, that would solve the problem; presumably, that is another reason why they want to come here. At least if they knew that it is simply not worth it.

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what, if they knew that they were going to be caught, that would solve the problem; presumably, that is another reason why they want to come here. At least if they knew that it is simply not worth it.

**Mr Chope:** We all sympathise with the problems of the French authorities in Calais, but does my hon.
Friend agree that one solution would be for the French to come out of the Schengen area? They could then
control the border between them and, for example, Italy, and that would deter people from coming to their
country illegally.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** The Schengen area is not as open as it was. Last summer, I was driving from Italy to France. I noticed that although there were no border checks between the two countries, there were loads of gendarmes checking every single coach and car at the first péage, where people pay the tolls for the motorway. My hon. Friend should not be too starry-eyed about the Schengen area; all sorts of controls are gradually building up all over Europe and I quite understand the position of the French Government, of whom I make no criticism at all.

The numbers are extraordinary. In November 2014, the answer to a parliamentary question gave some details
about the costs and impacts of juxtaposed controls in France:

“In 2013/14 the number of clandestine people detected at juxtaposed controls in France by Border Force and other agencies was around 18,000—a rise of over 60 percent from around 11,000 in FY2012/13.”

I suspect that the figures are far worse now than they were even a year ago. The annual cost of the Border
Force at the port of Calais per fiscal year is also quite extraordinary: in 2013, it had risen to more than £17.5 million.

The independent chief inspector of borders and immigration published a report on the inspection of
juxtaposed controls in 2013. He found that people found hiding in freight vehicles were no longer being
fingerprinted at Calais or Coquelles owing to limited detention facilities. The Government’s response to the
report agreed with his recommendation to review this policy. However, the Home Affairs Committee noted in
March 2015 that clandestine migrants caught in Calais or Coquelles are still not fingerprinted by the UK
authorities, unlike at other juxtaposed controls. They are handed over to the French police, who will release
them.

As we know, this is a sort of game. No matter how many times people try, there is no criminal sanction or
disbenefit—the migrants simply try again and again. The director general of the Border Force told the Home
Affairs Committee that the number of individuals attempting to enter the UK is significantly less than the
number of attempts. As the Home Affairs Committee report said,

“Sir Charles explained that the 30,000 attempts”—
the numbers are staggering—
“to enter the UK through the juxtaposed ports last year do not
represent 30,000 individuals”.

He said that many are trying again and again and again. Nevertheless, the Home Affairs Committee was critical
of the UK and French authorities’ approach to the problem. Some of its comments are tough and interesting.

It says:

“The number of interceptions by Border Force and PAF, the
French Border Police, highlights the sheer scale of the problem.
And yet we have seen no evidence that France or the UK is
pursuing a policy of processing and deporting the individuals
found at Calais. We find it bizarre that there are thousands of
tries to enter the UK illegally through Calais, at great cost and
inconvenience to business and leisure travellers, transport
companies, and hauliers, and yet the people who are caught are
simply released back into the French countryside.”

Extraordinary!

“Nothing in this process appears to serve as a disincentive to
returning to Calais and trying again and again, and there is no
evidence it has affected the number of migrants living in the
Calais area. It appears to be an admission of stalemate and
something must be done to break this cycle.”

The Committee goes on:

“It is apparent that extra security slows the traffic, creates
queues”—
as I go back and forth to the Council of Europe, I am
well aware of this—
“and can increase the vulnerability of the lorries to infiltration by
migrants. Improvements in security must be combined with
improvements in managing the traffic flow.”

That, surely, is the point.

We can build as many fences or walls as we like, but we
cannot manage the migrant flow unless the Government make
real, cogent and serious attempts, first, to get rid of the
incentive through something like my hon. Friend’s
Bill, and, secondly, to impose some sort of sanction.

These people are desperate—we should show compassion
to them because they come from appalling places—and
will keep trying again and again. There is the physical
risk, but in terms of the law there is no risk at all.

**The Committee goes on:***
The Home Affairs Committee goes on to say:

“It is important that improvements in security at one site do not simply displace clandestine activity to another site.”

That is why we cannot deal with this problem simply with fences. It continues:

“Much of the investment from the UK Government appears to have gone into improving security around the Port of Calais ferry terminal, rather than the Eurotunnel terminal at Coquelles.”

That was the case when the Committee wrote the report; I agree that things have moved on since. It concludes:

“If the Government accepts there is a security problem at both sites, then it should contribute to security measures at both sites.”

I accept that the Government are trying now to address the problem, but only in terms of improving the fences and security. My contention, and that of my hon. Friend, is that we also have to deal with the pull factor.

This illegal migration into this country is very serious in terms of public policy. Some people might say, “Maybe we want more immigration—maybe these people provide low-cost cheap labour”, and all the rest of it. I would argue that the ready availability of cheap labour reduces the need for employers to modernise their economy, and that for too long Governments have relied on open borders and cheap wages to keep the economy afloat.

The problem with this large-scale migration—illegal migration is the worst aspect—is that it is totally unsustainable in the long run in terms of the economy, public policy and public opinion.

The Chancellor has signalled his intention that we end this model and move towards a low tax, high wage society. Lord Rose, the head of the remain campaign, admitted before the Treasury Committee this week that if Britain leaves the EU and immigration within the EU falls, then wages will rise. Of course, we heartily welcome a pay rise for the lowest-paid workers in Britain because that means more disposable income for them to spend or save as they see fit. The more immigration there is, particularly the more illegal immigration, the more consequences there will be.

Untrammelled immigration was introduced in 1997 for social reasons. The then Government gambled on newly arrived immigrants and their offspring being reliable Labour supporters—not always the case—so they adopted the Brechtian policy of abolishing the people and electing another version. Unfortunately, this kind of bad, poorly thought out policy was backed by certain aspects of the business community. The debate has moved on, in the Conservative party and in the Labour party, and there is now widespread public support for a really tough, firm and compassionate immigration policy. Serious efforts by Government to train the population into a different point of view have failed.

Before we dismiss this as just a temporary blip, let us look again at some of the figures. They are extraordinary. As long ago as 2005, the Home Office produced a study. I have been unable to find a more recent study, and one might ask why not; I see the Home Office Minister here. The study estimated the number of unauthorised migrants living in the UK in 2001. It measured the discrepancy between census estimates of the total lawfully resident foreign-born population, based on migration records. It concluded that in April 2001 the total unauthorised migrant population, including failed asylum seekers, living in the UK was approximately 430,000, within a range of 310,000 to 570,000 people. We should note that this estimate does not include the children of unauthorised migrants born in the UK. That study was produced in 2005, and I would like to have a more recent one. This is a really important issue in terms of good race relations and all the other aspects we are talking about.

In 2009, the London School of Economics published a study commissioned by the Mayor of London that updated the earlier Home Office figures in order to estimate the unauthorised migrant population at the end of 2007. The study produced two estimates—one for the number of irregular migrants and another for the number of irregular residents. The first figure is comparable with the earlier Home Office estimate, while the second includes the children of unauthorised migrants born in the UK. The study concluded that at the end of 2007 there were approximately 533,000 irregular migrants living in the UK, within a range of 373,000 and 719,000—so it is getting worse. There were approximately 618,000 irregular residents living in the UK, within a range of 470,000 to 863,000. If the public were aware of these figures—there is already public concern—they would be truly alarmed. The study found that the majority of the irregular resident population was living in London, with a central estimate of 442,000 irregular residents living in the capital—about 70% of the estimated irregular resident population at the end of 2007. These figures are truly extraordinary.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend has recited some of the detailed research that the House of Commons Library has done on this. Does he accept that the implication of this research must be that by now there are well in excess of 1 million illegal migrants in this country—in fact, millions of them—and that it is about time the Home Office took an interest in trying to ascertain the exact numbers?

Sir Edward Leigh: Yes. I personally think—I put this in a half-hearted way to the Prime Minister in his statement a couple of weeks ago when I asked him why he was banging on about Polish immigration—that we are obsessing too much about east European migration. That is legal and understood. We have a fair idea of the numbers coming in, although there is a lot of dispute about the national insurance figures, which suggest that those numbers are far greater than is admitted by the Government. This matter has also been raised in Prime Minister’s questions.

In this House we are obsessing too much about the Prime Minister’s renegotiation and what he achieved and did not achieve, and forgetting what is in our control. It is argued that the Government can do nothing about migration from eastern Europe, unless of course we leave the European Union, but the issue of illegal migration is surely under our control, and it is now running at staggering levels. The people want to know what the Government are doing about it. What are they doing to find these people? My hon. Friend talked about the level of deportations. I think, off the top of my head, that he said that there were 12,562 deportations last year. Is that not an extraordinarily low proportion of the hundreds of thousands that I have been mentioning?

This is not just a matter of figures.
David Morris: If I remember correctly, the previous Labour Government gave two amnesties to illegal immigrants and asylum seekers who should not be here. Will my hon. Friend clarify whether the 2005 figures that my hon. Friend quoted since been superseded, or are they now completely irrelevant?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is precisely what I am asking. We now want an up-to-date study from the Home Office, but because we have such weak exit controls, the Government seem to have very little idea of what is going on.

Questions have been asked about this. On 18 January 2016, my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) asked “the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what procedures are in place to ensure that illegal migrants to the UK are returned to their country of origin, or otherwise breached human rights to their country of origin.”

That seems to be a very fair question. To be fair to the Home Office, I will give the answer provided by the Minister for Immigration:

“...the Immigration Act 2014 simplified the appeals system so that an appeal right only arises where a claim raising fundamental rights is refused, namely asylum, humanitarian protection and human rights claims. The Home Office has the power to require an appeal to be brought only once an individual has left the UK where the claim is clearly unfounded and where a person liable to deportation makes a human rights claim and it would not cause serious harm or otherwise breach human rights to require them to appeal from overseas.

The Immigration Bill seeks to extend the power to require an appeal to be brought from overseas to all human rights claims where an appeal from overseas would not cause serious harm or otherwise breach human rights. Similar provisions are set out in the Immigration (European Economic Area) Regulations 2006.”

Will the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees explain the deficiencies of the existing Immigration Act 2014 in processing illegal migrants, and how would the new Immigration Bill make any difference?

Mr Chope: Perhaps my hon. Friend could also ask for an explanation of the implications of the judgment in the case of Mircea Gheorghiu, who has been allowed to come back into this country despite the Home Office’s promises.

Sir Edward Leigh: Absolutely. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State can respond to that point.

The whole issue of migration, particularly illegal migration, is—I am sure that nobody would disagree with this—one of the most serious crises we face in Europe today. It makes it much more difficult to create a sense of community and cohesion in our democracy. Scandinavia is often held up as a paragon of social cohesion, but its countries’ economies and their whole sense of the community of the nation are now under threat as never before. That Nordic model is based on high taxation combined with strong, high-quality service provision. If there is more and more illegal migration, and if the Government do not even know what is going on, it is much more difficult to create homogeneity among the population, which has been one of the keys to the success of the Nordic model.

People in our country, and even more so in Scandinavian countries, were content to pay high taxes because they obtained high-quality services and knew that those services were going to their own people, who were here legally. However, if we add very high levels of immigration to the mix, and if hundreds of thousands of people are here illegally, that relationship of trust between people—who were prepared to pay high taxes because they knew that everybody else was doing so and they were getting high-quality services in return—starts to break down.

The debate instituted by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch this morning is not just about statistics; it is about the very bedrock and nature of society. Society is a contract, is it not, between the people? We know who the people are, we know where they live and we know they pay taxes—we all pay taxes and get public services in return. However, when literally hundreds of thousands of people are living in this country illegally and the Government have no idea who or where they are, and only 12,000 are being deported every year, trust in the immigration system and the trust on which society relies gradually breaks down. That is why my hon. Friend’s Bill is excellent and the Government need to respond to it.

11.24 am

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): It is an honour and a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who has set out with his usual clarity and wisdom why this Bill is so sensible. I congratulate my hon. Friend. The Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) on promoting it, and I am privileged to be one of its sponsors.

The House should be made aware of my hon. Friend’s determination in this matter. Members will recall that a very similar, though not identical, Bill was debated in this Chamber a little over two years ago. The situation that we find ourselves in today is much worse than it was then. Public opinion has certainly not improved since January 2014. It is worth reminding ourselves that that earlier Bill was tested among the public by Lord Ashcroft. He polled 2,013 individuals about what they thought of the measures, and 86% said that they agreed with them.

David Morris: I have to take exception with that, because the Ashcroft polls are not exactly accurate, as the last general election showed.

Mr Nuttall: I do not want to get into a debate about polling, but polls, as Lord Ashcroft frequently says, are not meant to be a prediction of the future. They ask people what they think of something at a particular time. The poll in question asked people not for a prediction, but for their thoughts on the measures. To that extent, it must be accurate to say that 86% of those who were asked said, “Yes, we think that the measures are sensible.”

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Could my hon. Friend give an indication of the number of people polled?
Mr Nuttall: I did mention that briefly, but I may not have stressed it enough. The number was 2,013 and, if I remember correctly, without checking the notes, only 9% said that they did not agree with the measures, while the rest did not know. The positive figure of those who agreed was 86%.

David Morris: On the poll's accuracy, how many people did not take part? It has been found that more than 25% did not take part in previous Ashcroft polls, and that skewed the results considerably.

Mr Nuttall: I am sure that some people declined to take part in the poll, but even if we assume, which would be an erroneous thing to do, that everyone who refused to take part did so because they did not agree with the Bill, there would still be a substantial majority in favour of the measures. That is my point.

The subject of illegal immigration is pertinent largely because of the great play that was made by the Prime Minister and others before the 2010 election that the aim of the forthcoming Conservative Government—as we now know, the outcome was a coalition Government—was to reduce the amount of net migration from the hundreds of thousands to the tens of thousands. We heard that claim many times, and I very much support such an ambition and such an aim.

When one looks at the figures, one clearly sees why such an aim and ambition was necessary. The average annual net migration during the 2005 Parliament was about 247,000 or roughly a quarter of a million every year. The figures reached a high of 287,000 in the year ending June 2007, and fell to a low of 205,000 in the year ending June 2009. There was a reduction in net migration following the 2010 election? Sadly, there was not. In the first year of the 2010 Parliament, net migration increased to 263,000 in the year ending June 2011. It fell a little for the following five quarters, falling as low as 154,000 in the year ending September 2012—the lowest estimated net migration in any 12-month period since the year ending December 1998.

Since 2012, net migration has risen again, reaching 336,000 in the year ending March 2015. That was about 89,000 higher than the annual average net migration during the 2005 Parliament, and it was the highest estimate of net migration in any 12-month period. Before the year ending March 2015, the highest estimated net migration was 320,000 in the year ending June 2005. The most recent estimate of net migration is 323,000 in the year ending September 2015. We have gone from having an annual average of about 247,000 during the 2005 Parliament to the latest figure of 323,000 for the year ending September 2015.

The figures for legal migration are not going in the right direction, so it is understandable, against that background, that there is even more focus on those who have arrived in this country illegally. As my hon. Friends the Members for Christchurch and for Gainsborough have already explained, we must ask ourselves why these desperate people in what the tabloids have called the “jungle” in Calais—I entirely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough that they will, I am sure; all have desperate stories of fleeing persecution—have not claimed asylum in France or, if they have come up through Spain, in Spain. Those people do not do so partly because of the pull factors, as they are so often called, such as our way of life in this country.

There is a whole range of reasons why people may want to come and live in this country. Our benefits system or our national health system may well bring them here. One reason why they may wish to enter the country illegally is that they know there is very little chance of their being arrested, imprisoned and deported. That is the key point. It is extremely worrying that we have no official estimates later than those for 2005, in the study which has been mentioned, for the number of people who are in this country illegally.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): From listening to the debate in my office and since I have been in the Chamber, it seems to me that, based on the figures, about one in 60 people in our country is here illegally. To put it more simply, someone on a London bus that is three-quarters full is here illegally.

Mr Nuttall: That is a very nice way of putting it. My hon. Friend makes a good point. It will be interesting to hear the Minister's response to such points.

One must question why there has been no more recent study. Of course—but I am sure I must be wrong—the reason why there are no more recent statistics may be that Governments of both colours do not want to know the answers. That is the truth of it, is it not? Nobody wants to investigate this problem because if the truth comes out that there are 1 million people in this country illegally, it would be so shocking. No one dares face up to that fact.

It is worth making the point—this is not a criticism, so I think I am in order, Mr Deputy Speaker—that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) claimed back in 2005-06, when he was employed as deputy general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, that about 500,000 illegal immigrants were working in this country. I have no reason to disbelieve the analysis he made some 10 years ago. In view of the figures I gave for what we might call authorised migration—legal migration—it is reasonable to assume on that basis that illegal immigration has also increased.

The Bill is not about reducing migration and this debate is not about our involvement with the European Union and the fact that our membership allows the free movement of people under European treaties, but free movement has an impact on illegal migration. Free movement makes it necessary for Governments to clamp down on migration from countries outside the European Union, making it much harder for people from such countries to come into this country legally, so there is an increased inducement for people to try their hand or to have a go.

Sir Edward Leigh: We have the absurd situation that someone from Romania who does not work here and will never want to work here can come to this country, but a most distinguished American professor of Shakespearian literature—one of the most distinguished people in the world—who came to Stratford-upon-Avon to talk about Shakespeare but stayed a few days too long, was arrested, frog-marched to a police station and deported. It beggars belief that we are preventing research.
scientists and nuclear physicists from India or America from coming here. Mass migration from the EU is therefore pertinent to this debate, because people are so frustrated and that is leading to all this illegal immigration.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. I am glad that Sir Edward has given his ruling, but I will give mine. He may think his intervention was pertinent to this debate, but I do not think it was. The EU has been mentioned and there has been a discussion around it, but I do not want this debate to be dominated by the EU. As has already been said, migration from the EU is legal, but this debate is about illegal immigration. I welcome Sir Edward’s rulings when he chairs Committees, but today I am in the Chair.

**Mr Nuttall:** Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for his anecdote.

In an earlier intervention, I referred to exit checks. I think that the point I made is a valid one. Although I accept that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch said, many illegal immigrants will not have the necessary papers and will therefore not be able to leave through the normal channels, there will be many who do have papers and are therefore able to leave the country. There must be some evidence. It may well be that the Minister is able to say, “There’s no problem. Every single person who has left and on whom we have done an exit check was here legally, and not a single person whom we have come across was not meant to be here.” That may be the finding, but I would be interested to know the figures.

When the Bill was debated the last time, one of the arguments against adopting the measures in the Bill, which I thought was a weak argument, was that it was too expensive to do anything and much easier to allow people to go about their business, and that when the Home Office could get around to it, it would deal with the problem. That re-emphasises the point that people will take a punt. They will come here on the basis that their chances of ever being detected are fairly low, and that if they just keep their heads down, they will not be locked up or deported.

The other argument put forward by the Minister at the Dispatch Box was that the Bill had no merit because it replicated measures that were already in statute, in particular the Immigration Act 1971, so there was no need for those in the Bill. That is all very well. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch mentioned that fewer than two people a week have been prosecuted under the 1971 Act. I think that he gave the figure of 72 in a year. Can the Minister confirm, as a matter of interest, that everyone who was prosecuted was deported?

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We are in a similar situation today to that of two years ago when, as luck would have it for the Government, the 2014 Immigration Bill was going through Parliament. Another Immigration Bill is going through Parliament at present, which contains a provision to make it a criminal offence for an illegal immigrant to work in this country. If, apparently, the 1971 Act provides sufficient penalties to deter people from being here at all, it would presumably cover the situation of their working here illegally. Let me put that another way. Can the Minister think of any circumstances where someone who is prosecuted under the new Immigration Bill could not already be prosecuted for being here illegally under the provisions of the 1971 Act?

Most of our constituents would consider this Bill sensible. I accept that it is not easy to calculate the number of illegal immigrants in this country. It appears that no attempt has even been made for more than a decade. But to try and brush the issue under the carpet because it is too difficult is not the way forward. We have to tackle the matter. The Bill is a modest measure, but it is one that would be welcomed across the country, and I am pleased to be able to support it.

11.45 am

**Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab):** It is a great pleasure to be here again on a Friday morning. I always enjoy these moments. The memories of them will last me into my old age.

I was worried that we would not get to this Bill today—after all, we had two Report stages and Third Readings beforehand. However, the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) was kind enough to talk to me and reassure me that we would indeed have the opportunity to discuss his Bill. In fact, he was kind enough even to tell me what time I would be speaking, and he was 10 minutes out. What can I say? I was here in decent time and I am grateful.

**Mr Nuttall:** Was that 10 minutes early or 10 minutes late? Should I have extended my remarks?

**Lyn Brown:** It is always a pleasure to listen to the hon. Gentleman. An extra 10 minutes would have taken me to the time that the hon. Member for Christchurch told me I would start.

**Mr Nuttall:** I was cut short!

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** By himself.

**Lyn Brown:** Illegal immigration is an extremely important issue. On the face of it, this Bill is about discouraging illegal immigration by implementing tougher sanctions against illegal migrants. Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the case made by hon. Members this morning, I do not think the Bill will actually work. I say it gently. The Bill would further complicate an already over-complicated immigration system. It would create yet more bureaucracy, and the hon. Member for Christchurch is normally the scourge of bureaucracy. It would create more obstacles for the authorities trying to remove people and more work for our overstretched police officers and border control people. Moreover, in many cases it would create huge disincentives for overstayers to depart from the UK voluntarily, and it would lead to inappropriate criminal prosecutions against vulnerable victims of human trafficking and modern slavery.

Before I go on to talk about the Bill, I want to say for the record that I believe that immigration has greatly benefited the UK. I know how much immigration has contributed positively in my constituency to our cultural and economic vibrancy. As someone who relies on the NHS, like everybody in this Chamber, I am so grateful for the immigrant doctors, nurses and healthcare workers who have treated me so well over the past couple of years and without whom we simply would not have an NHS.

**Sir Edward Leigh:** Of course, the hon. Lady is not in any way defending illegal immigration or saying that it has a benefit.
It is a fundamental British value to recognise the needs of those fleeing war and persecution. I believe that the UK should take more refugees fleeing the horrendous war in Syria, especially the children who are so vulnerable and are experiencing conditions that most of us cannot even imagine.

Having said that, I will start with the central premise of the case the hon. Member for Christchurch put for presenting the Bill: the idea that illegal immigrants can be in the UK with impunity. I say gently that I genuinely do not believe that his argument holds up. For a start, there are a whole number of criminal offences relating to illegal immigration. It is worth mentioning a few of the existing offences: entering without leave, obtaining leave by deception, remaining beyond the time limited by leave, failing to observe a condition of leave, assisting unlawful immigration, facilitating entry for gain, assisting entry in breach of a deportation or exclusion order, sham marriages and identity document offences. There are a whole bunch of others, but I did not have an awful lot of time between the publication of the Bill and preparing my notes for today, so I hope he will allow me to stop there.

I do not think that we have heard an example today that does not fall within one of those offences. Even if the hon. Gentleman did manage to find someone who had voluntarily and purposefully entered the UK illegally or overstayed illegally, but did not qualify for one of those offences, I say gently that it would not mean that they were able to stay in the UK with impunity. I think I should clarify what I mean by that. For me, impunity implies an ability to act without facing punishment or detrimental consequences. Just because an action does not result in a criminal sanction does not mean that it can be done with impunity.

Sir Edward Leigh: If the law is adequate and we do not need an extra law, why was the chap who walked straight back to France after the initial arrest? He was not even prosecuted and was allowed to remain here. If the law is adequate, why could we not arrest this chap and, ultimately, deport him?

Lyn Brown: I say to the hon. Gentleman that the laws are there. It is the way in which they are used and implemented that is in question. I genuinely do not have enough facts about the circumstances of that case to offer an opinion, but I am sure the Minister will be able to do that for him.

Those who are in the UK illegally do face a sanction: deportation. For those who are desperate to be in the UK, the threat of deportation is a massive threat that hangs over their heads and the heads of their children every day of their lives. In reality, the Bill would not alter the incentives for those who are considering entering or remaining in the UK illegally.

I say gently to the hon. Member for Christchurch, whom I genuinely like, that at best the Bill would be superfluous. However, I think it might also be harmful, as it would distract from the efforts the authorities are already making in respect of immigration. The more we look at the contents of the Bill, the more apparent it becomes that it would add additional processes and unwelcome bureaucracy—an outcome that I do not think would be welcomed by the hon. Gentleman, given his record as a champion of cutting bureaucracy.
did not go well. She was beaten and regularly abused. Humiliated and fearing for her life, she ran. She ran to the people in her own community and thought that they would protect her, but they did not. They let her husband know where she was and he came for her, dragged her on to a plane and took her back to her village and her parents.

The woman’s parents tethered her, like a goat, outside the home. She was there for three nights with nothing to eat or drink. Children from the village sneaked her water. Her family were discussing what to do with her. They wanted to kill her, because she had brought dishonour to the community. The head of the village intervened. He brought a man to talk to her father. That man persuaded her family to let him take her away. She regards him as her saviour, which perhaps in a way he was. He saved her life, he brought her back to the UK, and he found floors for her to sleep on, and mattresses in the corner of factories that his friends owned. They gave her food and drink, and in return and in gratitude for the shelter, she worked in their factories across the country for more than a decade. She did not come to my surgery because she thought she was a victim of violence or modern-day slavery; she came because she was worried that she would be deported back to her family to be slain. She would be criminalised by this Bill.

One key threat that traffickers use to control their victims is that the police will arrest them. I have heard of pimps who dress up as police officers to rape the women whom they coerce, and of stories told to Vietnamese children who have been trafficked to the UK to work on cannabis farms, that the police are out to get them. If the Bill came into force, the traffickers would be right, and the police would be obliged to arrest and prosecute those children. Regardless of whether an individual is a child or a trafficking victim, under the Bill they would be committing an offence. In all such cases, criminal prosecution adds nothing to the desired outcome of reducing illegal immigration, about which there is a real issue.

Under this Government—the Government who all those sponsoring the Bill support—we have seen big cuts to the police and Border Force. More illegal immigrants have abscended, and fewer have been deported while the backlog of information on cases is not being pursued. Under this Government the number of illegal overstayers passed the 300,000 mark. The House of Commons Library—bless ‘em—has worked on those figures for me because I asked for them yesterday. It tells me that, as of December 2015, the figure of overstayers and illegal immigrants in the country is 217,000. We need a Bill that will properly resource the UK Visas and Immigration service so that it gets through the backlog of unresolved cases.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: The hon. Lady has just quoted those figures, but earlier she mentioned various scenarios where someone could be in this country but not through their own fault. Do those figures include people who are overstayers although that was not their intention?

Lyn Brown: I think I am right in saying that given the nature of criminal gangs that traffic people in and out of this country, we do not know how many such people there are. I can only provide the official figures that the House of Commons Library gleaned from Home Office official publications. I have nothing else at my disposal. I say to my friends in Friday sittings that we need a Bill that backs Labour’s call for greater enforcement and tougher punishment for employers who employ illegal immigrants and pay their staff way below the minimum wage. We need a Bill that bans recruitment agencies that exclusively advertise jobs abroad, and a Bill that makes it an offence to exploit immigrant workers and undercut British workers. If the hon. Gentlemen who entertain me and exercise my grey cells on Friday mornings are looking for guidance on how those policies might work, I suggest that they follow the lead of the Prime Minister and have a go at reading Labour’s manifesto.

12.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Refugees (Richard Harrington): It is always difficult to follow the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), and before I get to the Bill, I will reply to her initial remarks about those Friday mornings that she will remember until the day that she becomes old and grey. On some Fridays that I have been here, that has actually happened during the morning itself, but she is—and looks—a lot younger than me.

On a more serious note, I agree almost entirely with the first part of the hon. Lady’s speech, because while we perfectly understand the intentions behind the Bill, it hugely oversimplifies a complex situation. I will try my best to answer some of the questions that she and other hon. Members have raised—I note that after midday on a Friday the ageing process happens more quickly than beforehand.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) has introduced a similar Bill on three occasions, and he recently sought to table new clauses to the Immigration Bill on Report. He will not be surprised to know that part of my response today will be along similar lines to the reply given on that occasion by my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General, but the Bill does raise important issues about migration, and specifically illegal migration.

I recognise—I think we all do—that legal migrants make an important contribution to our society. It is only right that those who are here illegally and do not have valid leave to be in the country should return home. If they do not do so, it is vital that they can be removed quickly and easily. Illegal migration remains a key priority for the Government. I believe we have taken significant steps to strengthen the border immigration system, including in respect of who is allowed to enter the United Kingdom and who is allowed to remain here. The Prime Minister said, so it must be right—I cannot say it is a good career move, but I will quote him anyway:

“That starts with making Britain a less attractive place to come and work illegally...The truth is that it has been too easy to work illegally and to employ illegal workers here.”

I commend the intention behind the Bill, but I do not believe that the measures it contains are necessary. I agree that it sounds like a simple and superficially attractive solution to the problem, but it is the Government’s contention that the issue is much more complicated.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) used the expression “like a child’s game” to describe what happens now with illegal immigrants. He gave the impression that it is a sport,
[Richard Harrington]

whereby people find their way into the country and are not deported or do not face criminal sanctions because they give themselves up. They are not treated as he would like them to be. Anyone who has seen these people and their plight, however, would not think it is a game at all. I contend that for all the reasons that would stop them coming here, the possibility of being arrested and receiving a £5,000 fine and six months in prison would not in any way be a deterrent. Where would they be deported to? Deportation sounds easy and a common-sense thing to do. Some may want to make use of the hon. Member for West Ham’s top-flight magic circle lawyer and send illegal migrants back to whatever country they came from. The truth, however, is that most have no place to be deported to. I accept that under the Dublin convention they can be deported to the country from which they came, but I think most would accept that that is no answer.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am afraid it is an answer and the Minister needs to address this point. People cannot understand why, when someone has travelled through perfectly safe countries such as Spain, France or Italy to the UK and are caught, they cannot be sent back to France and claim asylum there.

Richard Harrington: Without going into the complexities of the Dublin convention, it is just not possible in many cases. I will come on to argue that the pull factors that cause people to come here make the threat of deportation, a fine and a few months in prison irrelevant. People come here because they think they are marginal; some people think they are not deported or do not face criminal sanctions because they give themselves up. They are not treated as they hope they will be treated. I have heard an argument in this Chamber about whether landlords should be police officers. The point is that these issues are all part of the measures that are being rolled out to make it more difficult for illegal migrants to rent property.

These issues are all pull factors. People come here because they think they can live a better life, as has been said and accepted, or a safer life, as has been said and accepted. Through the different programmes sponsored by the Government, all those things are accepted.

One of my ministerial responsibilities is for our Syrian refugee programme, and I would like to thank Members of all parties for supporting it. Some people have lobbied us to take more, while a few argue that we should not take as many. Most people recognise the Government’s policy of treating the refugees that we do take in an honourable and decent way, allowing them to work straightaway, for example, and all the other things that go with it. What we are talking about here are illegal migrants.

A particularly relevant point to the arguments relating to today’s Bill concerns the Immigration Act 2014, which also streamlines the removal process for people who are unlawfully in the UK. It does so significantly by reducing and restructuring the migrant’s right of appeal.

Bob Stewart: If we are streamlining things, why is it that only just over 12,000 people were deported from this country last year, which seems an extremely low figure?

Richard Harrington: Given the date of the Immigration Act 2014 and the points I have made, it is too early to tell. Things are being rolled out only this year because of the process of having to get the Act into law, consulting on issues and all the things that go with it. There is no question, however, but that the process for removing people, reducing and restructuring the migrant’s right of appeal and the new powers to investigate suspected sham marriages and civil powers, together with extended powers for information sharing, will make a significant difference.

The current Immigration Bill is going through the other place at the moment and it builds on the foundations in the 2014 Act. Its purpose is to tackle illegal immigration by making it harder to live and work in the UK, and it specifically makes working and driving as an illegal immigrant a criminal offence. So criminal sanctions are relevant to some parts of the process. The Government do not deny that; it is logical. That does not mean, however, that the Government should support the simple and brief Bill before us. I commend the sponsors for its brevity, but because of some provisions relating to criminal offences, it does not support the overall principle claimed for it.

The Government are clear that the ability to work is the real driver for illegal migrants coming to the UK. I have spoken to many of the Syrian refugees and I know that all they want to do is work. This is not a benefits culture; most of the people who come here—certainly

Landlords are liable to a civil financial penalty if they rent accommodation to an illegal migrant without making the checks. I realise that these particular points can be criticised: some people think they are marginal; some people think they will not be enforced or that the onus will be put on the wrong people. I have heard an argument in this Chamber about whether landlords should be police officers. The point is that these issues are all part of the measures that are being rolled out to make it more difficult for illegal migrants to rent property.

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the Syrians I have spoken to—regard benefits as a form of begging in the street, and it is the last thing they want to do. Nevertheless, as the hon. Member for West Ham argued, illegal working undermines legitimate business; it undercuts minimum wage legislation; and it breaks all sorts of workplace regulations, for which people have fought here for more than 100 years. I truly believe that illegal migration is bad for people in this country; there is no question about that from an employment point of view. It can deprive British citizens and lawful migrants of jobs that should be theirs.

Mr Chopx: I once moved a motion in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe suggesting that asylum seekers in European countries should be allowed to work. We do not currently allow them to work in this country ab initio. Surely, if we allowed them to work, we would give people an incentive to apply for asylum immediately, and if their claims were refused, we would be able to require them to leave.

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend is right: our policy is not to allow asylum seekers to work until their legal status has been decided, but we have tried to shorten the intervening time. I should make clear that those who are covered by our humanitarian protection programme are allowed to work with no interregnum, because their status was sorted out when they were given their visas in the first place. However, I think we would all agree that, whether their applications are successful or not, the period during which asylum seekers do not know where they stand is too long. Given that they are also a burden on the United Kingdom taxpayer because they receive significant assistance from the state—although some might argue that it is not enough—it is in everyone’s interests to ensure that their status is determined very quickly.

We are taking further steps to limit the factors that drive illegal migrants to the United Kingdom. We have, for example, created a role for a director of labour market enforcement, which extends the powers that are currently available to the Gangmasters Licensing Authority. We are also amending the criminal sanction for employing people unlawfully in the United Kingdom, which will make it easier to bring prosecutions. For the first time, rogue businesses will face a real possibility of imprisonment for repeated or serious breaches of labour market legislation. At present, many such breaches are punishable through a fine, which the businesses involved regard as merely a cost of working, almost as we regard paying tax or any of the other normal working expenses. That is outrageous, because they are committing a criminal offence.

We are improving immigration enforcement by imposing tougher conditions on illegal migrants, denying them further access to services including housing and banking, and giving more powers to immigration officers conducting enforcement operations. The Immigration Bill will enable landlords to obtain possession of their property when their tenants no longer have a right to rent. We are also creating four new criminal offences to target rogue landlords and agents who deliberately and repeatedly fail to comply with the right to rent scheme, or fail to evict individuals who they know—or have reasonable cause to believe—are disqualified from renting as a result of their immigration status.

We are dealing with rogue employers, just as we are dealing with rogue landlords and driving by illegal immigrants. Many people have been taking advantage of the present system, but they will no longer be allowed to do so, and will face criminal sanctions. It will be possible, for instance, to close business premises for up to 48 hours when an employer has already incurred a civil penalty, or has been prosecuted for employing illegal workers. We are attacking the infrastructure that currently surrounds illegal immigrants: we are attacking every aspect of their lives that is illegal. More important, we are attacking those who actually perpetrate the illegality. For example, the Bill makes illegal working a criminal offence in its own right, because we think that that is sensible.

Mr Nuttall: Will the Minister now answer the question that I asked earlier? In January 2014, he said that these provisions were not necessary because they were in the Immigration Act. If someone who is in the country illegally can already be dealt with under the Act, what is the point of creating a specific offence?

Richard Harrington: I did answer my hon. Friend’s earlier question, and I will answer this question in the same way. We are talking about the combination of an existing Act and a Bill that is going through Parliament. As I have just said, the Immigration Bill will make illegal working a criminal offence in its own right, and that will cover self-employed as well as employed people. Moreover, it will be possible for wages paid to illegal workers to be seized as the proceeds of crime, through the activation of powers conferred by the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

There seems to be an argument that we need this Bill because the Government are doing nothing, and because there is complete anarchy relating to illegal immigration. The European Union referendum came up quite a lot in the earlier part of the debate, and I accept that that discussion would have been stopped if we had been under your supervision, Mr Deputy Speaker. Your predecessor in the Chair—Mr Speaker himself—was perhaps more tolerant on this issue. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”] I did not mean the issue of whether we should remain in the European Union; I meant the issue of whether this debate should be expanded to cover that subject.

I always listen very carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough. He centred a lot of his speech on Europe and on the consequences of leaving the EU that French Ministers have been mentioning recently. I do not think that that is relevant to this debate. I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) who said that if we were not in the EU, we would have to have different relations with France anyway and everything would need to be renegotiated. So I am slightly confused about this. What does my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough think an illegal immigrant is? No one could possibly say that all the people from Europe who are here at the moment, including the Polish people who have been mentioned, are illegal immigrants. Would they become illegal immigrants? It has been made very clear that they are all coming here to work.

Sir Edward Leigh: The Minister must not try to put words in our mouths, because this is a really important subject. Nobody in the leave campaign is suggesting
that people from Europe who are already legally resident here should in any way become illegal immigrants. There is no suggestion of that at all.

Richard Harrington: I can assure my hon. Friend, out of personal respect for him, that I would not suggest that. He has accepted, however, that all these Polish people come here to work. If they came here to work in the future, would they suddenly become illegal immigrants? I am not sure, and I do not think it does the Bill any good to confuse the issues.

Mr Chope: As the Minister rightly says, this is a Bill about illegal migrants. Can he tell us how many illegal migrants there are in the United Kingdom at the moment?

Richard Harrington: Strangely enough, I cannot say exactly—[Laughter.] This is the serious answer to a question my hon. Friend tabled asking the Home Office to produce more recent estimates of the numbers of illegal immigrants. I believe that he quoted a report from 2005. I was going to answer that question by not answering the question exactly, but by explaining that there are no official estimates of the number of illegal immigrants in the UK because, by definition, the clandestine nature of their presence makes that very hard to estimate.

So what are we doing about this? We have taken action in the Immigration Act 2014 to collect exit data, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) mentioned earlier. Such data have not been collected in the past. Collecting data on those leaving the country will give us a clearer picture of the number of those who enter legally but overstay their visa. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch will accept that partial answer to his question, even though it is not the full answer that he wanted. In fact, he already knew the answer to his question. Like all good barristers, he knows that you should never ask a question to which you do not know the answer. He was still right to ask it, but he knew the answer in advance.

I am slightly confused by the points that were made about the Calais situation. It is perfectly legitimate to discuss that situation in the context of illegal immigrants, but I do not accept that the clauses in the Bill would prevent migrants from gathering in Calais in an attempt to reach the UK. I do not accept that basic premise. I accept the fact that people have a perception of this country as El Dorado, but they would not say to themselves, “I can come in illegally and do everything that I want but, oh, I might get a £5,000 fine and six months in prison so I won’t do it.” I do not accept that.

We are working closely with the French authorities to strengthen security at the French ports, and we are taking firm action to try to reduce the pull factors that make the UK attractive to these illegal immigrants. I cannot accept the premise that putting more and more people in prison would suddenly make people stop coming here. We would need some pretty big prisons. However, I agree that getting rid of the incentives and the factors that make people think they can come here illegally and have a sort of permanent life outside the system is a pretty big intention.

I am conscious of the fact that time is moving on. I have gone through many of the points in the Bill, including the extra powers that an immigration officer will have.

The hon. Member for Gainsborough asked about the carriers’ liability and whether it applies to the channel tunnel. As he knew already, it does not currently apply to train operators in the channel tunnel.

Sir Edward Leigh: Why not?

Richard Harrington: Well, we are keeping the policy under active review. [Interruption.] Members may mock, but in a democracy one reviews and assesses a problem before taking action. Perhaps, before these people even get on a train or are deported, we could consider a six-month prison sentence, or a £5,000 fine; I do not know. The Government are reviewing the matter to see what action is appropriate. They will take action where the threats of illegal immigration justify it. Having seen what happens every night in Calais, I do not think—forgetting the merits of the situation—that putting these people into prison, fining them and saying that they will be deported will prevent them from what they are doing. None the less, our arrangements with France are beginning to work, and the French authorities have been extremely co-operative.

In addition to the changes in the laws, we are ramping up the whole of Government’s approach to controlling immigration. We are trying to deal with the fact that Government activities have been compartmentalised. My own appointment in relation to Syrian refugees covers three Departments. If I ever was a tiny footnote in history—one may very well argue that I will not be—it could be that I am the first Minister in history to cover three Departments. I am sure that we would all support greater co-ordination across agencies in Government to ensure that, where we identify illegal working, we extend our enforcement reach and apply the full range of sanctions available against illegal migrants and rogue employers.

We have shown that we will create additional criminal offences when we perceive there to be a need. However, I believe that adequate criminal sanctions and removal and deportation powers to deal with illegal migrants are already in place in the existing immigration legislation and the legislation that is going through Parliament. We are talking about serious criminal offences, and they will be dealt with through the criminal system. I could go through them at length, but my hon. Friends know them, as they took part in proceedings on the Immigration Bill and other such measures.

There are many different criminal offences, which, in the past, were treated as civil matters, the sanctions for which were so light that they did not have any effect at all. That is where there is a fundamental difference now.

The Bill proposes a power of deportation. The deportation would be mandatory, whatever the circumstances, unless the Secretary of State, who, I can assure Members, is pretty busy, intervened to say that deportation was not in the public interest. I must explain that deportation is a power that is reserved for those who have been convicted of a crime in this country and for those, such as those involved in terrorist cases, whose presence in the country is not considered to be conducive to the public good.
The Immigration Act 1971 sets out the power for the Secretary of State to deport an individual where it is deemed to be conducive to the public good, or where there is a court recommendation for deportation. The UK Borders Act 2007 further sets out that, subject to exceptions, if a person is sentenced to at least 12 months' imprisonment the Secretary of State must make a deportation order against the criminal. That means that neither people entering the UK illegally nor those remaining in the country without leave are persons who are liable to deportation. The Bill would seek to remedy that, but it does not take into account the fact that immigration legislation provides for adequate removal powers for illegal entrants and overstayers without requiring a costly prosecution first, for what are minor offences in the overall scheme of immigration offences. We have always preferred migrants to depart voluntarily as it is better for the migrant, allowing them to leave on their own terms, and much more cost-effective for the Home Office. We will pursue enforcement action against those who are not prepared to leave voluntarily, but we do have human rights obligations.

Bob Stewart: From the public’s point of view, someone who comes into this country illegally has committed an offence and should be deported forthwith. The Government do not seem to have the drive to do it, judging from the Minister’s reply.

Richard Harrington: The Government certainly, to use my hon. Friend’s words, do not “have the drive” to have a unilateral and automatic policy and power of deportation in criminal action whatever the circumstances; that is true.

I do not believe, therefore, that the measures proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch are necessary for the prevention and punishment of illegal migration, and for the reasons I have outlined the Government cannot support the Bill.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Richard Harrington: I have finished.

12.31 pm

Mr Chope: I am grateful to everyone who has participated in the debate, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), who are sponsors of the Bill. I much enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) from the Labour Front Bench. I much enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) from the Labour Front Bench. I much enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) from the Labour Front Bench. I much enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) from the Labour Front Bench.

There is at the heart of this debate a fundamental difference between the approach that I and my hon. Friends would like the Government to take and the one that the Government are taking. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Conservative party, in its manifestos both in 2010 and 2015, promised that we would reduce net migration to the tens of thousands. In the light of today’s debate, I think that promise needs to be rephrased—we should promise that we will, in the future, reduce illegal migration to the tens of thousands.

The hon. Lady referred to the people traffickers, the exploiters and the pimps to demonstrate to the wider world that the Government are not controlling the things that they could control.

The EU aspect has been brought out in the debate, but the charge of indifference brought against the Government—I know the hon. Member for West Ham also brought it—to some of the key issues has been well made.

The hon. Lady said that my proposals were very bureaucratic, but the people who are here illegally are being exploited and they are vulnerable. Although they are not being prosecuted, under the existing legislation they could be. The fact that they could be prosecuted if they are shopped by the people who control them makes them not want to put their heads above the parapet.

The current levels of illegal immigration are enabling the people traffickers, the exploiters and the pimps to carry on their business, and that is creating a whole underworld of crime. I would have thought that the Home Office was more interested in trying to address that. The Bill would enable all the people currently in that underworld to come forward before 1 July and admit that they are here, and under this legislation they would then not be guilty of a criminal offence. That would send out a clear message to people trying to get into this country that they need to do so before the Bill becomes law, but after that there would be a strong deterrent effect. The Bill would indeed be a fresh start.

The hon. Member for West Ham said that there are 207,000 overstayers—people who came here legally but are no longer entitled to be here and should have gone back to where they came from. What is being done about them? The Minister puts his arms up, metaphorically, and says, “Well, where are we going to deport them to?” What is absolutely clear is that they do not have the right to be in this country. The hon. Lady referred to some interesting constituency cases, and if someone has overstayed by mistake, we should in most cases be able to rectify that pretty quickly. At the moment, the authorities tend to pick on those people for an oversight in order to demonstrate to the wider world that the Government are taking the issue seriously. The Government are picking on the hapless people who have made a small error. I had a constituency case the other day of a person who accidentally submitted five months of wage slips as evidence, rather than six months. They have now been told that they have to go back to wherever it is and make a fresh application, with all the associated expense. The Government are incredibly petty in dealing with
the good people who have made a slip, and they are incredibly poor at dealing with the real villains.

That would all be put right if the Bill received its Second Reading today. However, I fear that it is too late in the Session for the Bill to have a realistic prospect of getting on to the statute book. I therefore seek the leave of the House to withdraw the motion. In so doing, I want to say that I will bring the issue back again, because this is an issue about which the people feel very strongly, and so do we.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.
Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): That system also seems to work here, which I think is wrong.

Mr Chope: It can work here, although my hon. Friend should remember the courageous move made by my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Mr Carswell). He said he did not wish to carry on as a Conservative Member and wanted to change his party allegiance. Before doing that, however, he sought the endorsement of the electorate in a by-election. That was a worthy approach. I hope that the mood is changing and that people will not feel that they can ignore the mandate given to them by their constituents and switch parties without reverting to their electors.

The Bill seems quite complicated in the sense that, although it has only three clauses, one clause has nine subsections, but I have been advised that that is the only way in which we can alter the existing system to introduce the open list system for elections to the European Parliament.

I look forward to hearing what my hon. Friend the Minister says. I expect him to preface his remarks by saying that he hopes we do not have any more European elections, but that, if we do, he can assure us that they are going to be more democratic than those we have had in the past.

12.45 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): As has been correctly said, the system of proportional representation that we now have for the European Parliament elections was first introduced in 1999, and one of its key hallmarks is the fact that it is a closed regional list system. It is also worth noting that there is a very complicated—some Members would say so—system of allocation of seats to the candidates under the d’Hondt system, which is in place in many European countries and in the European Parliament itself. It is named after a famous Belgian gentleman, I understand.

One of the key concerns, which is the subject of this Bill, is that we have a closed regional list system. It is worth pointing out that a such a system is not unique to the United Kingdom. Such systems exist in a number of European countries. In France, there is a closed national list, which is criticised by many people. Indeed, there are strong arguments against having a closed system. One of the key arguments is that it creates a very impersonal kind of election whereby people vote for political parties rather than individuals, and therefore the focus is very much on the message of the central political party rather than on that of the individual candidate, because there are no individual candidates, as such.

It is true that voters cannot pick and choose between candidates of one particular party. Their vote is for the party of their choice, and the party machine decides who is on the list and who therefore stands the best chance of being elected. As has been made clear, the system does not allow for an individual who is elected on one party’s regional list but changes political affiliation once elected to have to stand for re-election. However, that is exactly the same as our electoral system.

There are indeed strong arguments against the current system, and it is worth our having a serious debate about what preferred system of proportional representation may replace it. I say that because in 1999 the United Kingdom, as a matter of this Parliament’s choice, decided to adopt a proportional representation system, but now it is obliged under European law to have a proportional representation system, so if we are going to change it, we cannot simply turn back the clock to first past the post; we have to have a different form of proportional representation.

There are arguments in favour of our current system, one of which is that it helps to create a system of representation for the United Kingdom that is more reflective of the population as a whole. It is now possible to have a degree of gender balance among Britain’s representatives. The onus is on the political parties to ensure that they have that gender balance on their regional lists, if they wish to do so. Nevertheless, a responsibility is placed on the parties—my party, especially—to have that gender balance. The same applies to ethnic minorities: there are now more ethnic minority representatives than would otherwise be the case.

It is unfortunate that many people do not easily relate to the European Parliament. Even when it had a first-past-the-post system—I was a Member of the European Parliament for 10 years and was elected under that system—it was not easy to build a personal relationship with the electors, and that continues to be the case under the regional list system. Perhaps we should not kid ourselves that a personal relationship will ever be that important in European elections. Perhaps it is more important to recognise that people vote for political parties, including domestic parties and others that may be affiliated to pan-European parties.

There is a debate to be had. This debate on the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) is a continuation of that on a similar Bill promoted in the last Session. The issue needs to be resolved and I welcome the debate. I look forward to hearing the Government’s response to the very good points made by the hon. Gentleman.

12.51 pm

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) for once again bringing to the House the issue of the voting system for European parliamentary elections. A similar Bill was debated in the final Session of the previous Parliament, so this is a good opportunity to explore the arguments and update the House on the Government’s position.

My hon. Friend clearly feels strongly about the issue and he has made his argument with persuasive force. The way in which we elect our representatives is a topic of great importance and it has a significant impact on the relationship between electors and their representatives. I thank hon. Members for their contributions and I assure those present of the seriousness with which the Government take such matters.

The Bill would make provision for an open list for elections to the European Parliament to be used in all electoral regions other than Northern Ireland. That would represent a change from the current closed-list system, whereby electors vote for individual candidates rather than political parties.

The voting system to be used for European parliamentary elections has been debated at length in both Houses of Parliament, and it is clear that there is a range of views
Mr Rob Wilson: on the merits of the closed list voting system. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), the then Minister for the Constitution, said at the Dispatch Box in the previous Parliament, “the closed list system is simple for electors, and it ensures that across a region seats are allocated in proportion to the votes cast.”—[Official Report, 9 January 2015; Vol. 590, c. 547.]

I know from that debate and the views expressed today, however, that there is some dissatisfaction with the closed list system. The fact that parties solely determine the order in which candidates are awarded seats achieved by the party has come under fire, as it is said that it puts too much power in the hands of the parties and results in MEPs who are remote from their electorate.

Bob Stewart: My concern is that the real electorate of MEPs are the members of their party. People spend their time canvassing at party meetings, trying to garner support so that their party will put them one or two places up the list or at the top of it. That is a clear lack of democracy for the people of this country.

Mr Wilson: That is clearly one of the criticisms made of the system. In any debate we would need to think about that carefully and take it into account as part of any changes. There is of course some substance in what my hon. Friend says. I will address some of those issues in further detail as I develop my comments.

At the end of the last Parliament, my hon. Friend the then Minister for the Constitution suggested that this issue might be one for consideration in the next set of party manifestos. As hon. Members will be aware, no party’s election manifesto addressed the issue directly.

We remain sympathetic to the arguments for moving to an open list system for our elections to the European Parliament, and we understand the rationale behind them. For example, we recognise that introducing an open list system might help to address some of the issues about MEPs being seen as distant from their electors. That said, it is important to remember that every electoral system has its pros and cons, and that the choice is wider than one simply between an open or a closed list system, because other systems, such as the single transferable vote, are also options for consideration.

As hon. Members will be only too well aware, the Government have a busy programme of constitutional reform, so this issue is not currently a priority. During this Parliament, we have already introduced rules for English votes for English laws and completed the transition to individual electoral registration. In addition, we are currently working to devolve further powers to Scotland and Wales, remove the 15-year time limit on the voting rights of overseas electors, update parliamentary boundaries and explore further ways to improve the process of electoral registration.

It is worth noting that there have not been widespread calls for change. The country recently voted against changing the voting system for Westminster parliamentary elections. In the 2011 referendum on the alternative vote system, electors overwhelmingly voted to retain first past the post for elections to this place. We remain sympathetic to the arguments for moving to an open list, but for those reasons we have no plans to consider such a change at present.

Wayne David: In all honesty and generosity, I say to the Minister that if the Government wish to alter their timetable for constitutional and political change—for example, to ditch the proposition about new parliamentary boundaries for the next election—we would be more than amenable to supporting this change to the electoral system for the European Parliament.

Mr Wilson: I note the hon. Gentleman’s comment, but I do not think we will be taking him up on his offer in the near future. The Government made a number of manifesto pledges in this area, and we are going to deliver on our pledges, including on all those involving electoral reform and boundary changes. I thank him, however, for his kind offer.

Mr Chope: My hon. Friend said that in the 2011 referendum the people of the United Kingdom overwhelmingly endorsed the first past the post system. Does he share my regret that the European Union is now preventing us from being able to reintroduce first past the post for European elections? What business is it of theirs? Why can we not decide that for ourselves?

Mr Wilson: As my hon. Friend will know, this country agreed to change the electoral system at European level from first past the post, and having done so it would be fairly disingenuous for the Government to go back on it at this stage. Although we may move to another system, we could not now go back to first past the post. I will make a few more comments about that in a moment.

It may help hon. Members if I set out some information about the history of the voting system used in UK elections for the European Parliament. As they will know, direct elections for the European Parliament first took place in 1979. From 1979 until 1994, such elections in Great Britain were held under first past the post. I am very keen to support that system, and I certainly supported it at the referendum in 2011. Great Britain was divided up into a number of single Member constituencies. At each election voters had one vote, and the candidate in each constituency who received the most votes was returned as the MEP for that constituency.

Since the first elections in 1979, the single transferable vote has been used in European elections in Northern Ireland. That reflects the long-standing practice of using proportional representation and specifically STV in Northern Ireland for elections other than to the House of Commons. My hon. Friend’s Bill proposes no change to the type of voting system used in Northern Ireland at European elections.

The Labour party manifesto for the UK general election in 1997, as the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) said, gave a commitment to introduce proportional representation for European parliamentary elections. Upon taking office, the new Labour Government announced that they intended to introduce a regional list system for the European parliamentary elections. The European Parliamentary Elections Bill was introduced in Parliament by the then Government in October 1997.

That Bill proposed a system where a voter in each region would have one vote which could be cast for either a party or an independent candidate. Hon. Members may be aware that debate in Parliament centred on the type of list system to be used, with a number of attempts
made to introduce a form of open list system, where voters would be able to vote for individual party candidates. The then Government’s preference was for a closed list system. Their concern about the open list system, as suggested by the then Opposition, was that there might be individual candidates who were not elected, while others from another party with fewer individual votes were elected because their party was more successful overall. In other words, voters’ preferences for individual candidates may not necessarily be translated into electoral success. This might call into question the legitimacy of some elected representatives.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): I feel convinced that in years to come the Minister’s speech today will be studied as part of constitutional history and will be the reference point. It is a magnificent piece of work. May I tell him that in Northern Ireland the reason why we use the alternative vote, why we use the d’Hondt system and why we even use the rather exotic Droop quotient on occasions is that there was a disconnect under the brute simplicity of first past the post? Although first past the post has its attractions, it cannot claim to proportionally represent the electorate. That is the problem. Does the hon. Gentleman not realise that there is a genuine difficulty with first past the post in very, very large constituencies when it comes to representing the whole of the electorate?

**Mr Wilson**: That is the first time I have heard of the Droop quotient. Obviously, it is something the hon. Gentleman is very familiar with. We are not proposing to restore first past the post at European elections. This is a debate about a closed and an open system for candidates, so we will not be proposing that we go back to the first past the post system.

Helpful research, which the hon. Gentleman might be interested in, was produced by the House of Commons Library, explaining that at Lords Third Reading a Conservative amendment based on an open list system modelled on the Finnish system was successful. Members of the other place pressed this amendment and eventually the Government used the Parliament Act to take the Bill through in the following Session. The result was the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999, which introduced a closed list system. This was used for the first time in the June 1999 European parliamentary elections. The European Parliamentary Elections Act 2002 superseded the 1999 Act and made provision for the closed list system to be used for elections to the European Parliament in Great Britain.

I should also explain that, following the Matthews case, the European Parliament (Representation) Act 2003 extended the franchise for UK elections to the European Parliament to Gibraltar. The Act provided for Gibraltar to be combined with an existing region and, following a recommendation from the Electoral Commission, Gibraltar has been combined with the South West region for the purposes of European parliamentary elections.

It is important to note that under European law Council decision 2002/772/EC, which amends the 1976 Act of the European Parliament concerning the election of Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, Members are now required to adopt a proportional voting system for elections to the European Parliament.

The decision was made with the agreement of all member states, including the then UK Government. As I have indicated, the current system for European parliamentary elections in the UK was put in place by the European Parliamentary Elections Act 1999 before the requirement in European legislation for a proportional system was introduced.

It might be helpful if I set out briefly the key features of the closed list system that has been used for European parliamentary elections in Great Britain since 1999. Elections to the European Parliament are currently held every five years. For the purposes of European parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom, Great Britain is divided into 11 electoral regions. Each region must have a minimum of three MEP seats. There are nine regions in England: East Midlands has five seats, Eastern has seven, London eight, North East three, North West eight, South East 10, South West, which includes Gibraltar, six, West Midlands seven and Yorkshire and the Humber six. Scotland, which has six MEP seats, and Wales, which has four, each form an electoral region for the purposes of the European parliamentary elections.

In Great Britain, under the closed list system, electors have one vote, which they may cast for a party or an independent candidate. The seats in each region are allocated to parties in proportion to the number of votes they receive, using the d’Hondt formula.

**Stephen Pound**: Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Wilson**: I will in one minute.

There is no threshold of votes that a party or candidate must achieve to win a seat in a region. The seats are assigned to party candidates according to the order in which the candidates are displayed on the ballot paper. That order is predetermined by the party before the election. I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**Stephen Pound**: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman’s flow, but he mentioned Scotland, England and Wales. Did I miss his mention of Northern Ireland?

**Mr Wilson**: The hon. Gentleman must have done, because I mentioned Northern Ireland earlier in respect of the single transferable vote.

**Stephen Pound**: Yes, I heard that. I meant in respect of the number of seats.

**Mr Wilson**: I will come to that if the hon. Gentleman will be a little bit patient.

**Stephen Pound**: Phew!

**Mr Wilson**: It might be helpful if I outline briefly the d’Hondt method that is used to allocate the seats in electoral regions for European parliamentary elections in Great Britain. Under the d’Hondt formula, seats are allocated singly, one after another. The basic idea is that, at each stage, a party’s vote total is divided by a certain figure, which increases as it wins more seats. The divisor in the first round is one and, in subsequent rounds, the total number of votes for a party is divided by the number of seats it has already been allocated, plus one. I can see that everyone is clear about the d’Hondt formula as a result of that explanation.
The number of seats for Northern Ireland is three, just to answer the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound).

**Wayne David:** I wonder whether the Minister would care to comment on whether the d'Hondt system helps or hinders smaller parties.

**Mr Wilson:** Obviously, the d'Hondt system is named after the Belgian lawyer who devised it as far back as the 1870s. It is what can only be described as a complicated system. It is certainly somewhat complicated for a simple layman like me. However, I would be very happy to arrange a seminar with officials for any hon. Member who seeks to understand the system in more detail than my remarks in the Chamber today have allowed. I hope that that satisfies the House.

**Mr Chope:** Will the Minister explain how the d'Hondt system relates to open lists?

**Mr Wilson:** I knew that if I mentioned the d'Hondt system I would get questions, but I am sure that my hon. Friend will be delighted to come to the seminar that I am arranging, and questions of that nature will be answered in great detail. We could arrange a two-day seminar if that would help.

**Mrs Sheryll Murray:** Given the number of different parties represented on a ballot paper for the European Parliament, would not open lists that included names make those ballot papers lengthy and difficult to count?

**Mr Wilson:** Yes, and that is one criticism made of the system. If I have time, I hope to come on to that point.

I know that the hon. Member for Ealing North is keen to hear about Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland uses the single transferable vote for European elections. The Bill will make no changes to the voting system used there, although I will say a few words about the STV system so that hon. Members can compare it with the list voting systems that we are debating today.

STV has been used for European parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland since 1979. There is a long record of STV being used for elections in Northern Ireland, and it is used for Assembly and local government elections. That is for historical reasons, and it helps to ensure cross-community representation. Under STV, electors rank the candidates on the ballot paper in order of preference, marking one next to their first-choice candidate, two next to their second choice, and so on. Electors can rank as few or as many candidates as they wish.

First preference votes are counted first, and any candidate who reaches a set quota is elected. Any votes received over the quota are not needed by the elected candidate and are transferred to the second preference on each ballot paper. The value of the transferred votes is based on a formula. If not enough candidates have reached the quota, those with the lowest number of votes are eliminated, and all their votes are passed to the next preference on the ballot papers until the quota is met and the seat is filled. The process is repeated until all seats have been filled.

It may be helpful if I set out some details about how European parliamentary elections are administered, focusing on arrangements in Great Britain, given that the Bill would change the voting system for elections in Great Britain, although not in Northern Ireland. Each of the 11 electoral regions in Great Britain has a regional returning officer, and Ministers are responsible for designating an RRO for each electoral region. In England and Wales the RRO must be an acting returning officer for UK parliamentary elections, and in Scotland they must be a UK parliamentary election returning officer. Broadly, RROs are responsible for the overall conduct of the election of MEPs in their electoral region, and for liaising with and co-ordinating the work of local returning officers.

The RRO’s specific duties in each region include giving notice of the European parliamentary election, the nomination of procedures for parties and candidates wishing to contest the election, the calculation of votes given for each political party or candidate, and the allocation of seats in the region. The Bill would impact on the counting of votes at European elections—I shall say more about that later—and on the declaration of results. The RRO has power to give general or specific directions to local returning officers relating to the discharge of their functions at the election.

**David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): If the d'Hondt system is applied to our electoral system, and if we have independent candidates as the Bill would suggest, would that not distort the system and come up with a result that is null and void?

**Mr Wilson:** No. Independent candidates are self-standing. They are treated in the same way as a political party, so there should be no reason why it would distort the system. The system has elected independent candidates in places across Europe, so I do not think that that would be the case.

European parliamentary elections are administered on the ground at a local authority level by local returning officers. At European elections, each electoral region is divided up into counting areas. A counting area will represent a local government area—for example, the London Borough of Southwark forms a counting area for European elections. Electoral law provides for an LRO to be appointed for each counting area within the electoral region. The LRO will be the person who is the returning officer for local government elections in the local government area. That comprises the counting area. The LRO will therefore act for a particular count within the electoral region. To summarise: the RRO has overall responsibility for the conduct of the election in their electoral region; the LRO is personally responsible for the administration of the election in their counting area. In administering the election in their counting area and discharging the functions for which they are specifically responsible, LROs will have regard to any guidance issued by the RRO and must comply with any directions they have given to them.

**Wayne David:** Would the Minister care to explain what the variation is with regard to the region of the south-west and Gibraltar?
The UK elections were held concurrently with council elections in England and Northern Ireland on 22 May. The UK now has 73 MEPs, up from 72 at the last election, distributed between 12 regions. UKIP won 24 seats, Labour 20, the Conservatives 19, Sinn Féin won only one seat, down from 11 at the 2009 European election. The BNP lost their seat, down from 11 at the 2009 European election. The Bill will have an impact on the counting process at European elections. The seats in each region are still allocated to parties or independent candidates in proportion to the total number of votes they receive—namely, for a party. The total sum of votes given to all the candidates standing for the party in the region will determine the total number of seats allocated. Under an open list system, seats are assigned to party candidates in the order of those receiving the highest number of votes. In some open list systems, voters may choose whether to vote for a political party or a particular candidate within that party’s list. The Bill, however, does not provide for that. At this point, it may be helpful to inform our consideration of the Bill by saying a few words about the earlier review of the balance of competences, which addressed the voting system used for UK European parliamentary elections. Under the coalition Government in July 2012, the then Foreign Secretary launched an audit of what the EU does and how it affects the UK, and it was based on evidence from a range of stakeholders. The voting, consular and statistics report of the review was published in December 2014, and the call for evidence was open for three months from March 2014, while submissions of evidence were received from a range of stakeholders, including electoral administrators, academics, relevant non-governmental organisations and other organisations, and the devolved Administrations.

It is good to see Labour coming second again—I could not resist that, I am sorry. It continued:

“Labour won the popular vote in Wales, while the SNP came first in Scotland. UKIP came first in six of the nine English regions, with their strongest performances in the East, the East Midlands, the South East and the South West. Sinn Féin won the most first preference votes in Northern Ireland. UKIP’s share of the vote increased by 11.0% points, while Labour’s increased by 9.7%. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat share fell by 3.8% points and 6.9% points respectively. UK turnout was 35.4%, slightly higher than 34.8% in 2009, but lower than 38.4% in 2004, when four regions held all-postal ballots.”

Let me comment on the features of the open list voting system, which is central to today’s debate. Under open list systems of proportional representation, electors still elect MEPs to multi-member electoral areas or regions, and will have one vote. However, the key difference between open list and closed list voting systems is that under an open list voting system, electors may cast their vote for an individual electoral candidate as opposed to a particular party, as happens under the closed list, or indeed an independent candidate.
based, first past the post system, to the closed list system in use for UK European Parliamentary elections today. The majority of this debate focused on the planned move to a closed rather than open list system of proportional representation.

Respondents expressed mixed views regarding the EU requirement for MEPs to be elected in accordance with the principle of proportional representation. One reason given for this was the potentially weaker electoral connection between MEPs and the electorate. Some attendees at a stakeholder event held in Brussels to discuss the issues in this report felt that the move from first past the post to proportional representation had weakened this link because voters did not select an individual to represent them directly. It was also noted that, given these arrangements and although MEPs do receive a significant amount of casework, electors were more likely to contact MPs in the first instance.

In contrast, the Electoral Reform Society stated that ‘it is correct that the EU only allows countries to use a proportional system... additionally, it is correct that an institution such as the European Parliament, which runs on consensus and scrutiny, should reflect the broad swathe of the British public’. The Scottish Government was also of the view that the requirement that all Member States adopt a system of proportional representation was reasonable. They felt that whilst it was sometimes suggested that first past the post systems created a closer link between candidates and the electorate, equally there was strong support for a proportional system which ensured that voters were more likely to see a candidate from their selected party elected.

The majority of respondents did, however, criticise the closed list system used in England, Scotland and Wales. A few attendees at the stakeholder event in Brussels saw the closed system as an advantage because ‘it gives voters some certainty as to the candidates most likely to represent them on behalf of a party, if that party was elected’. However, the general opinion across respondents was that the closed list system failed to ‘engage voters to the same extent as an open list system’. As the Electoral Reform Society highlighted, ‘polls suggest only around 7-10% of the public can name their MEP’. For this reason, some attendees at a stakeholder event held in London expressed a preference for the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system used in Northern Ireland, or for further research to be undertaken in this area. The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland noted in his evidence that ‘there are no real concerns about the lack of constituency links with regard to…MEPs in Northern Ireland.’

The majority of respondents considered that to introduce open list systems (used elsewhere in Europe) for UK European Parliamentary elections would be a positive development; for example, the Electoral Reform Society felt that such a move to an open list system would be a ‘vast improvement’. This argument is reinforced in an article published in 2009 by academics Professor Simon Hix and Dr Sara Hagemann, which found that in those countries using open list systems electors were 20% more likely to be contacted by candidates or parties rather than in those states which used closed list systems. Electors were also 15% more likely to say that they felt informed about elections and 10% more likely to turn out. However in the main it was felt that a change to the current balance of competences was not necessarily the most effective way to achieve stronger links between individual candidates and electors’.

A number of respondents to the call for evidence expressed concerns about the current closed list voting system used at European parliamentary elections in Great Britain. However, as I said earlier, there have been no widespread calls for a change in the open list voting system; certainly, my postbag is not full of such requests. Also, this country recently voted against a change to the voting system used for Westminster parliamentary elections in the 2011 referendum on the alternative vote system. There does not appear to be a great appetite for change on the part of the public across the country, and we have to take that into account when we consider this issue.

As hon. Members are aware, EU legislation stipulates that all member states must adopt a proportional voting system for the European parliamentary elections using either a list system or single transferable vote. I understand that a small number of member states use the single transferable vote for European elections. The Republic of Ireland and Malta are examples of this. However, most member states use a form of list system, with both closed and open list voting systems being used to elect MEPs across the member states.

Seats in the European Parliament are allocated to member states on the basis of degressive proportionality. This is the principle that the distribution of seats to member states should, as far as possible, reflect the range of populations. Larger member states have a higher number of MEPs than smaller member states, but in turn, those MEPs represent a larger number of citizens. There is a minimum allocation of six MEPs for a member state and a maximum of 96. Germany is the member state with the largest number, with 96, while Estonia, Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta each have six.

For the record, the current number of MEPs for each member state is as follows: Germany 96; France 74; United Kingdom 73; Italy 73; Spain 54; Poland 51; Romania 32; the Netherlands 26; the Czech Republic 21; Belgium 21; Greece 21; Hungary 21; Portugal 21; Sweden 20; Austria 18; Bulgaria 17; Denmark 13; Finland 13; Slovakia 13; Ireland 11; Croatia 11; Lithuania 11; Latvia 8; Slovenia 8; Cyprus 6; Estonia 6; Luxembourg 6; and Malta 6.

Stephen Pound: United Kingdom: nul points.

Mr Wilson: No, it’s not the Eurovision song contest.

Prior to the 2014 European parliamentary elections, the Lisbon treaty provided that at those elections the total number of MEPs should be reduced from 766 to the current total of 751, including the President of the European Parliament. However, the UK’s allocation was increased by one, so it is not null points for the United Kingdom.

Stephen Pound: Pardonnez-moi!

Mr Wilson: The UK’s allocation was increased from 72 to 73 seats under the Lisbon treaty, slightly increasing our proportion of seats in the European Parliament.

An area that I think is relevant to today’s debate is voter turnout at European elections. One argument that can be put forward in support of an open list system is that it gives the elector a greater choice and more say over which candidates are elected. This could lead to electors feeling more engaged in the electoral process. It is not clear whether a change to an open list system would impact on turnout for European parliamentary elections in Great Britain, however, as turnout at any election is affected by a range of factors in addition to the voting system.

Since the first European parliamentary elections in 1979, turnout at UK European parliamentary elections has consistently been lower than the average turnout across other member states. The average turnout at European parliamentary elections across all member states has steadily decreased since the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979. With the exception of the 1999 UK European parliamentary elections,
which were not combined with local elections as is usually the case, turnout in the UK under the current closed list system has been broadly comparable with the level of turnout seen at the UK European parliamentary elections held under the first-past-the-post system between 1979 and 1994.

The figures that I have on turnout for past European parliamentary elections, rounded to the nearest whole number, are as follows: 32% in 1979; 33% in 1984; 36% in 1989; 36% in 1994; 24% in 1999 when, as I said, there were no local elections at the same time; 39% in 2004; and 35% in 2009. At the 2014 European elections, according to the House of Commons research paper, turnout across the UK as a whole was 35.4%, compared with 34.5% at the previous election in 2009, so the figures were roughly the same.

Turnout in 2014 across the European Union was 43%. The paper notes that turnout in some of the newer member states was relatively low. For example, in Slovenia it was 23%, Croatia 25%, Czech Republic 18%, Poland 23% and Slovakia 12.7%. I should explain that the open list system is not currently used in any statutory elections in the UK. Introducing an open list system at European parliamentary elections in Great Britain would require both primary and secondary legislation, and that requirement should be factored in when considering a possible change to the voting system for European parliamentary elections.

In addition, there are a number of practical and logistical implications that would need to be considered when changing the voting system for the European elections. Political parties, candidates, electoral administrators and electors would all need to receive guidance and instructions on the workings of the new voting system, which would be novel and potentially complex for electors. In particular, a public awareness campaign of some sort would be necessary to ensure that voters understood the requirements of the new voting system and that their votes were correctly cast at elections.

The design of the ballot paper would change quite significantly under an open list system. On the ballot paper, under the current closed list system, there is a box against the name of each party and each independent candidate, and the voter puts a cross in the box next to their choice. The names of the party candidates are shown on the ballot paper underneath the party for which they are standing, but they are printed in a smaller font size than the name of the party, and there is no box against the name of each party candidate, because the voter will cast a vote for a party under the closed-list system.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: Will my hon. Friend expand on what he has just described? In the south-west, there was a ballot paper for a European election on which there were about 32 different candidates or parties. If we added to the ballot paper the names of the party representatives, we could end up with a ballot paper that was about a metre long.

Mr Wilson: A ballot paper that is a metre long would be extraordinarily complicated and very difficult to understand. I certainly do not want to see any ballot papers that long, and neither, I am sure, does my hon. Friend.

However, under an open list system, the ballot paper would need to be redesigned to allow voters to cast a vote for individual party candidates, which is why it would need to be so long. As a result, the ballot paper would be expected to be longer and more complex than that used under the current closed list system, in particular in those electoral regions with a greater number of MEPs.

In the south-east region—not just the south-west region—there are 10 MEPs and each political party would therefore have the option to list up to 10 candidates on the ballot paper. As I have indicated, the ballot paper would need to be redesigned so that a box appears against the name of each candidate on the ballot paper to enable the voter to indicate their choice of candidate.

The counting of votes under an open list system would also be expected to take longer and be more costly, as the votes cast for each party candidate would first need to be added up to establish the total votes cast for the party and the number of seats that they are entitled to be allocated. That compares with the closed list system where votes are cast for parties only, and establishing the total numbers of votes for each party would be expected to take less time than under an open list voting system.

Moving to an open list system would also raise cost issues and, given the Government’s central role in funding European elections, we would wish to look at that very carefully before we did so. Although the issues might not be insurmountable, they would need to be carefully considered and assessed before any decision is made to move to a new voting system for European parliamentary elections.

I should like to finally conclude by recognising that this issue has generated some lively debate and discussion in this House and elsewhere.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The Minister has spoken a lot about the importance of raising turnout in European elections, which is at the heart—partly—of what he has been describing. Does he think that it would be useful for electors to be more aware of where MEPs do actually make a difference in local areas—I know this is a rather unfashionable view—and make an impact for local people?

Mr Wilson: The provision of more information about the role of MEPs, particularly closer to European elections, might have a role in stimulating greater turnout. We are seeing with the European referendum at the moment that there is a huge desire—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to take up any of the time left to the Minister because I appreciate that he has a lot to tell the House on this complicated subject, but it would help if he would not mind facing the Chair as he does so, because the Chair is also fascinated by what he has to say.

Mr Wilson: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was just saying that one of the things that the public are yearning for now as part of this referendum is more information. More facts and more information on European matters would be highly desirable.
Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): One of the other things that people are yearning for is for 16 and 17-year-olds to be given the vote. Does the Minister regret his party not supporting votes for 16 and 17-year-olds in the EU referendum?

Mr Wilson: That is not a matter for this Bill, as the hon. Lady knows. If she wants to have a discussion with me elsewhere, I will be happy to do that. [ Interruption. ] She could come to the d’Hondt seminar, indeed; maybe we could discuss it as part of that.

Vicky Foxcroft: There is actually a private Member’s Bill on that subject on the agenda today. Unfortunately, I do not think it will end up being debated, but perhaps the Minister could see whether there is a way of moving it up the agenda so that it can be debated.

Mr Wilson: I am sure the hon. Lady’s comments are on the record and will be noted by her party’s and other managers in the House. I hope she will be able to debate that private Member’s Bill on another occasion.

Wayne David: I was just going to politely remind the Minister that he has not responded to the question I asked—but please, please, if he responds, would he do so very briefly?

Mr Wilson: There is no variation. Gibraltar has its own local returning officer. I do apologise; I was going to come to that before I moved to my closing remarks, but time is moving on and I have taken up rather a lot of the House’s time. I know that one or two Labour Members are desperate for me to continue, but I feel I must now bring my remarks to a close.

The closed list system was first introduced for the 1999 European elections and has been used at successive European elections since then. It is simple for voters to understand, and ensures that across a region seats are allocated in proportion to the votes cast. We should therefore think very carefully before making any changes to the current voting arrangements. That said, from the debate and other debates, and from the views expressed here and elsewhere, I know that there is some dissatisfaction with the closed list system. It can be seen to give parties too much power in determining which candidates are elected and does not create a strong link between MEPs and the electorate.

However, as hon. Members will be aware, the Government have a number of priorities in the area of constitutional reform, such as, as I mentioned, English votes for English laws, individual electoral registration, more powers to Scotland and Wales, implementing the commitment to removing the 15-year time limit on the voting rights of overseas electors, updating parliamentary boundaries, and so on. That is quite a constitutional package to put through this House.

In addition, it is worth noting that outside of this House there does not appear to be a great appetite for this change. For those reasons, we remain sympathetic to the arguments for moving to an open list but we have no plans to look at this at the present time.

1.44 pm

Mr Chope: It has been a pleasure to listen for so long to my hon. Friend on the Front Bench. I think that he will be a worthy nominee to the European Commission, because he has today shown his capacity to make a bureaucratic mountain out of a veritable molehill. He has also, in the course of his speech, set out a number of very good reasons why we would indeed be better off leaving the European Union, for which I am grateful. He pointed out that even when all the United Kingdom’s MEPs vote in the same lobby, they have fewer than one in 10 votes, which means we will always be in a minority. We will always find that our national interest cannot be protected in the European Parliament because of the system we have. I hope that the Government will be saved the burden of having to examine the issue any further when the people decide to leave the European Union on 23 June. In anticipation of that result, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

Bill withdrawn.
Football Governance (Supporters’ Participation) Bill

Second Reading

1.48 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am grateful for this opportunity to speak, albeit a little later than I had hoped, following the Minister’s tour de force in dragging out the previous Bill. [Interruption.] Well, it certainly was a tour, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) says from a sedentary position. It is a shame that more Members are not here. Had we been more certain of the time of the debate, I think that it would have been well attended. I understand that the Government do not support what I am trying to achieve, but many Members on both sides of the House are interested, as are the football teams in their constituencies, and could have contributed to quite a significant debate. Sadly, the vagaries of how the House operates on Fridays did not allow that. None the less, that does not detract from the importance of the issue.

I thank the Football Supporters Federation and Supporters Direct, which helped me consult supporters trusts and fans groups up and down the country. Nearly 100 groups responded to the consultation. I had telephone conferences with them and held meetings in Manchester, London and other places to discuss the issues. We surveyed their attitudes towards fans’ involvement in the governance of football and their football clubs.

Some 97% of respondents said that they were not given enough representation. Nearly 86% said that they supported the concept of the right to buy shares and nearly 84% wanted representation on their club boards. When we look around football today, we clearly see that football fans are under-represented and not listened to. No matter what level of the game we look at, we see examples of where things could be improved if football fans had greater representation. The Football Association has a 123-man council; it is almost entirely male. There are a handful of women, but I am not sure how many, and there is just one fan representative on that council. That cannot be right. We need to improve representation and the voice of football fans at every level.

A lot is going on. Only a week ago, a new president of FIFA was elected. Just prior to his election, FIFA agreed a whole load of reforms. Anyone who follows football knows that FIFA needs fundamental reform. In fact, my view is that FIFA cannot be reformed; it needs to be put into some form of administration. A new body needs to be created and put in its place.

I congratulate Gianni Infantino on his election as president. I have been critical of FIFA and the system that elected him, which I still think is corrupt, although that is not to suggest that Mr Infantino is corrupt. The system is corrupting, and I will be a critical friend of Mr Infantino’s to ensure, along with many others, that the reforms are adhered to and delivered in full.

Many people have said that the election of Infantino is a breath of fresh air, but he is part of the previous establishment and football has a difficulty in breaking away from that. He was the best candidate among those who were available. It is disappointing, however, that in what was almost his first press conference he said that the 2018 and 2022 World cup bids would not be rerun. Investigations are going on that could determine whether the decisions awarding those tournaments were sound, and it is far too previous to conclude that the bids will not be rerun.

With the FIFA reforms, we are supposed to be drawing a line over what has gone on in football, yet the two World cups coming up in 2018 and 2022 are mired in the history of what has gone on at FIFA; it is difficult to see the changes as a result of a new broom and to think that the organisation is completely clean of what has gone on in the past. I wish Mr Infantino all the best with his changes and I am sure that we will return to the FIFA issue. As Mr Infantino said at his press conference, it is the fans and the game itself that are most important.

Even the highest debating and decision-making chambers of football such as FIFA have to remember the fans who make the game so special. The way in which football is part of the communities where the football clubs are based is so important to the beating heart of football. Everyone who is involved in making decisions in the game must remember that.

Fans are becoming increasingly important because big business is moving into our football clubs in a way that it never has before. We are now hearing talk, yet again, of a breakaway league of all the top clubs across Europe. If clubs were foolish enough to move into such a super-league, I would be inclined to say to the FA, “Tell those sides ‘Good riddance.’ Close the doors to the FA cup to them and let them go, and let’s continue to run our football league and have the confidence in it to create new super-clubs.” There is something special about the English football league. People around the world enjoy watching it. They enjoy the atmosphere created by the fans, which is reflected in the football played on the pitches that makes it a product that people around the world so much want to watch. There is something special when one of our top clubs such as Arsenal or Manchester United is drawn against one of the big European football clubs such as Real Madrid, Barcelona or Borussia Dortmund. If that were to happen regularly within a football league, the special nature of those international clashes and the excitement of those tournaments would be lost. Those clubs would be making a serious mistake if they moved away into a super-league.

Football is no longer looked on as a way of wealthy business people having an interest aside from their business by running a football club. It has often been said in the past, “If you want to make £1 million out of football, buy a football club for £4 million”, because it has not been a way of making money; owners of football clubs have invested in them and seldom taken money out. That has completely changed. Looking back at the finances of the premier league, and, to some degree, the championship only a few years ago, there was enormous debt. There is still debt in the championship, but the TV deals that have been done for the premier league have almost completely wiped out the debt there, and football clubs are looked on much more as money-making businesses. Those clubs’ links to the communities in which they are based are therefore even more important than they have been in the past. Those people sweeping in on their private jets wanting to buy football clubs are not looking at the communities that have sustained those clubs through generations over many years, through
the good times and the bad times, and the very strong links that they have with the communities in which they are based.

It is the fans who anchor the clubs in that tradition. It is the fans from those communities who have sustained those clubs over many years. It is the fans who are passionate about their clubs who fill the stadiums week in, week out and create the atmosphere that makes the package—for the premier league, in particular—so attractive to sell around the world. Owners who turn their backs on that tradition will do so to the detriment of their football clubs. That is why it is so important that today we are recognising the importance of the role of fans in sustaining football clubs, maintaining these traditional links, and making sure that they are not lost as clubs begin to become more profit-making and more attractive to people who are not steeped in the traditions and the history of the clubs that they are attempting to buy, or do buy.

Fans are increasingly looked on as customers and as no different from someone who shops at a supermarket. If customers get a better deal down the road, they simply change supermarkets. No passion or allegiance is involved; they do not wrap a supermarket scarf around their neck when they shop. The link between a fan and a football club, however, lasts a lifetime. Some are lucky enough to support clubs that frequently play in the top flight, while some of us have heavier crosses to bear. I am a Millwall season ticket holder and, believe me, it is a heavy cross to bear at times.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on promoting the Bill. I am also a Millwall season ticket holder—

Stephen Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Good heavens!

Vicky Foxcroft: It is in my constituency. I will be going this weekend to celebrate Jimmy’s Day, and I hope that my hon. Friend will also be there.

Clive Efford: I certainly will. Jimmy Mizen was, sadly, murdered in a street attack. His mother and father, Barry and Margaret, have set up the Jimmy Mizen Foundation, which aims to create community safe havens in which young people can seek refuge if necessary. Millwall football club and Charlton Athletic both support the charity, and there will be an event at Millwall tomorrow. I will be there in my usual seat in the stands, supporting Jimmy Mizen Day and cheering on Millwall football club, which is not doing too badly this season.

As I have said, some of us have heavier crosses to bear with the sides we support, but we are no less passionate about them. I could not change my football club. Charlton Athletic’s training ground is in my constituency. Millwall’s training ground used to be there, too, but it has moved to Lewisham now. The team’s fortunes dipped when it moved there, but they seem to have picked up now. People were surprised that I remained open about the fact that I was still a Millwall fan and they asked me, “Won’t you switch to Charlton because it’s the local club?” Fans cannot switch like that, and even if they attempted to do so, they would lose the respect of other football fans. It is imprinted on people from a young age. Fans are not like any other customer. They are passionate about their clubs, and their relationship with them lasts a lifetime. That needs to be stressed to football club owners and to the Premier League.

Stadium occupancy rates are often mentioned, and those for weekend premier league matches are very high. Last season’s annual report states that the occupancy rate was nearly 96%, so the grounds are full. The Premier League is a huge commercial success. It pays £2.4 billion to the Exchequer, and its gross value added is £3.4 billion. It has become an enormous success and one of our greatest exports. In the next three-year deal for its domestic rights, it expects to receive in the region of £6 billion. The international rights will take that figure up to more than £8 billion over three years. That money will go to the Premier League and British football, so it is an enormous success, but, with those sums of money floating around, it is essential that we do not lose sight of what exactly created those football clubs in the first place and why they exist today; the communities in which they are based and their fans.

There are many examples of such communities coming together to protect their football clubs. At the moment, Blackpool’s is fighting hard to get recognition from the owners to protect their football club. One of the greatest examples is that of Portsmouth. The club was in the FA cup final only a few years before it went into receivership and had to be saved by the local community and local fans. People came together to save a great football club, which has some of the most passionate football fans to be found anywhere in any country.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend not agree that for every AFC Wimbledon, FC United of Manchester or group of fans who have refused to let their club die, great and noble clubs such as Clydebank exist no longer? It would have been far better if clubs such as Clydebank had had fan representation on its board, because it would not then lead to people going through the agonising process of defending their clubs. The process would be much more automatic, and we would be able to keep the full gloriously rich panoply of names in English and Scottish football.

Clive Efford: I agree with my hon. Friend. I will come on to some of the recommendations of the expert working group, which may address his point.

When football clubs are in distress, we can see how the communities have rallied round to save them. Sadly, Hereford United went out of existence for a short period, but it has been recreated because the fans, refusing to let the name die, were determined to save their club. Let us look at the success of Swansea City, 20% of which is still owned by the fans. Where would it be if the fans had not stepped in to save it? Wimbledon—what a tragic story—was let down badly by the football authorities. The community’s club was stolen away from them, but the way in which they have recreated a club, AFC Wimbledon, to thumb their noses at football’s ivory towers is fantastic.

My Bill is not about giving the fans a veto over what goes on at their clubs. I am not suggesting for a moment that the involvement of football fans is somehow a panacea for all the problems in football. There have been times when football clubs have gone into receivership...
even though the fans had all along cheered every decision that put the club into financial jeopardy until the receivers turned up and locked the doors. Fans cannot provide the solution to every problem, but they care passionately about their club and they can be an early warning system to alert authorities to existing problems in our clubs, particularly such as those at Hereford.

More recently, clubs have come into conflict with their fans in ways that might have been avoided if there had been better communication or if the fans had had a voice on the board when decisions were made. Liverpool comes to mind, as does the Football Supporters Federation’s “Twenty’s Plenty for Away Tickets” campaign. Because of the pricing of tickets at Liverpool, 10,000 fans walked out in the 77th minute to say to the club, “We’re not putting up with this”. That brought about a change, but the conflict might have been avoided if the fans had been at the table when the board discussed ticket prices and the board had put its views to the fans. A more ridiculous example happened at Leeds, where a “pie tax” has been added to the tickets. When people pay for a ticket, they get a voucher for what is probably a very unhealthy pie, and that has been ridiculed. I wonder whether the board would have come up with such a marketing ploy if it had talked to the fans. Similar things have happened at Hull City, Cardiff and elsewhere that I could go into, but I will cut through that because we are short of time.

I want to talk about the expert working group. I welcome its recommendations as far as they go. They will require football clubs to meet fans at least twice a year so that the fans can air their views, but that is not enough. There needs to be a regular dialogue and exchange of information. This does work in clubs already, so there is nothing to fear from fan representation on the boards. The Government should look at what the expert working group says about social investment tax relief to make it easier for bona fide fans groups to take over their football clubs. I wonder why we are saying that we will help fans to take over their clubs only when they are in financial difficulties. If the fans are good enough to have a stake in their clubs in the bad times, they must be good enough to be able to buy shares in the good times, if they wish to do so.

We need to ensure that fans are represented. The expert working group says that the FA must address the lack of representation of fans at the higher levels of the game. I want to hear from the Minister what the Government intend to do about that.

My Bill, as I said, is not a panacea that would solve every problem in football. One of the things that is fundamentally wrong in football now is that fans are not being spoken to and they are not being listened to. Where they are, and where clubs encourage it—Millwall has a fan on the board, who is elected by the fans and is party to all the discussions that go on around the table—that does not create a problem for the club. Where representation exists, the relationship between the fans and the club is improved, as is the exchange of information between them.

My Bill would do three things. It would require the fans to set themselves up as a single bona fide body. I have suggested that that should be an industrial provident society, but that can be discussed. That body would be responsible for electing two members to the club board—two members so that they are accountable to one another—and they would report back to the fans about the board’s discussions. They would need to be trained and taught the responsibilities of being a board member—for example, when they may or may not divulge confidential information when they report back. Where the board is larger, there should be a minimum of two fans or up to 25% of the board, whichever is the greater number.

That bona fide fans body would be empowered to buy shares when there was a change of ownership. I have been advised that in the City that is recognised as occurring when 30% of shares or more are on offer, so when 30% of the shares were exchanged or sold, the fans would have 240 days in which to buy up to 10% of those shares which is 3%.

Those are the three elements of my Bill—it would put fans around the table when the issues that affect them are being debated, and allow them, where they have the will to do so, to take a stake in their club. Clubs have nothing to fear from that. At a time when football is increasingly seen as a global business, it is important to recognise the people who identify with that club and who give it its distinctive character, which comes from the community and has sustained that club for generation after generation. Those people are the fans, and it is time we gave them the recognition they deserve.

2.13 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) on bringing a first-class Bill to the House. It is truly bizarre that here we are, in the most exciting ever premiership season, when the reputation of football and football clubs has never been lower, and there is a profound disconnect between what is happening on the pitch and what is happening in the boardroom. Much of this is to do with the ownership of clubs.

The ownership of football clubs may not be as it was once perceived in the glorious sepia days of jumpers for goalposts, when northern clubs would be owned by some Alderman Foodbotham out of Peter Simple, with his iron watch chain, who was a sort of philanthropic local industrialist. Fulham, without doubt the finest football club in west London, was owned by Deans Blindmakers of Putney, and Chappie d’Amato was the chairman. There was a wonderful tradition with those people. Nowadays, people from the middle east and America, consortia, strange groups miles away, distant people own football clubs. I do not see that as ownership. They may have the shares, the keys to the boardroom and an executive car park, but that is not owning a football club. The ownership of a football club is in the hearts of the community and the fans. That is why my hon. Friend’s Bill is so incredibly important.

Football is not a fad. A football club is not something that can be picked up and put down. A football club is not something that just happens to be a feature of a local area. It is a part of the community. It is the living, breathing reality of a local community. When one sees clubs such as Brentford and Charlton putting up candidates in local elections and the degree of local concern when a club is under threat, one realises that this is more than just sport. This is about our culture and our community. Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that many people in your constituency are West Ham fans. I am sure that
you are a regular on the terraces of Upton Park. You are probably one of the better behaved ones, I hasten to add.

The important thing about my hon. Friend’s Bill is that we need to reconnect the people, the fans and the communities with the clubs. Sadly, that will not happen organically. It will not fall as a gentle rain from heaven. We need some legislation. That is why the right to buy shares—I never thought that I, an honest socialist, would ever plead for the right to buy, but I do in this specific case only—and the mandatory placement of fans on boards are things that we have to go ahead with. Alistair Mackintosh at Fulham meets Danny Crawford and the Fulham Supporters Trust on a regular basis. That practice is good where it is good, but it is not mandatory or statutory and it needs to be.

I could speak for so long on this subject, but I will not because others wish to speak. I simply implore the House, I plead with the House, to support my hon. Friend’s Bill. It could be the saviour of football—the game that we invented in this country and gave to the world. It is now seen in a pretty poor light because of the great disconnect. We have an opportunity to regain that supremacy, that primacy and, above all, that link, to make a reality once more of the working man’s ballet, representing our local communities.

I have a lot of sympathy with the Bill. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound).

I know from my frequent visits to Halesowen Town football club the importance of fans and the community being engaged, even in a non-league club. The club has a long history, but has had recent difficulties. The efforts of the local volunteers who have maintained the stadium in Halesowen and contributed to the revival of the club reveal that across the whole football spectrum, from the premier league or all the way through to the Evo-Stik non-league leagues, fans and local communities have a vital role to play as the custodians of their clubs.

I recognise what the hon. Member for Ealing North said about the changing nature of the ownership of football clubs in Britain. The concerns that he has about the foreign ownership of English football clubs are shared quite broadly. I understand the nature of those concerns—that the traditions of clubs that are taken over by foreign owners will not be appreciated, that new owners may be unfamiliar with the complexities of the English game or that foreign owners might not think about the long-term prospects of the game.

Alternative models along the lines proposed in the Bill must focus on the long-term financial stability of the football clubs to which it might apply. We might all have some kind of romantic or sentimental view about a lost golden age of English football. I remember standing on the terraces at the Trent end of the City Ground when Nottingham Forest was in its heyday in the late 1970s.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): As a Tottenham supporter I hope that we will be entering a golden age of football in the next few months. The hon. Gentleman is making an eloquent case in support of the Bill. When I go to watch other sports, such as rugby league in St Helens or Gaelic football in Ruislip in west London, I pay a small amount for a ticket. People who go to those games are just as passionate as football fans who pay an inordinate amount. He says that there are no alternatives, but we must find one because it is imperative and important to sustain our national game.

James Morris: I do not argue that there are no alternatives, and one of my concerns about the Bill is that—like so many other Bills—it imbues the Secretary of State with regulation-making powers to intervene in football clubs, which are private concerns. I am concerned about the blunt nature of the proposed mechanism. However, that does not mean that there are no viable alternatives for encouraging greater fan participation in clubs, such as different forms of company structure or community interest companies, as mentioned in the report by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on football governance. For example, there might be other mechanisms in the Localism Act 2011 regarding assets of community value—there is no reason why a football club should not be considered such an asset.

I was speaking about the idea of a romantic golden age of English football. Seeing Leicester City at the top of the premier league reflects the fact that it is possible for clubs that are not traditionally considered to be the most financially solvent or in the top bracket of the premier league to do very well—that is why I referred to Nottingham Forest in the 1970s. It is understandable that the hon. Member for Eltham feels that we need to shake up the ownership of football clubs, but as I said, I am not sure that his Bill adequately addresses some of the complexities of encouraging supporter ownership and participation.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the expert working group on football supporter ownership and engagement, which was commissioned by the DCMS and its Committee, raised important issues about football governance. For example, one recommendation in the Committee’s report was to give the Football Association greater power over licensing football clubs, which speaks to some of his concerns about the threat of foreign ownership of football clubs, and the issues that arise from that. We must have a much tighter regime of football club licensing, and the FA has a role to play in that. How do we define a football supporters association? Can we be sure that the best fans are being selected, and by what process? Who has the final say on the appointment to that supporters organisation? Does every supporter get a vote?

The Bill raises very important issues and the hon. Gentleman is right to bring them to the attention of the House. Greater supporter participation in football is
I congratulate Media and Sport (Mr David Evennett): 2.28 pm
of British football. involvement, which is absolutely central for the future
supporters can have a real sense of participation and
Government will support the proposals, so that football
needs to go out from this House. I very much hope the
on and are very coherent. I believe a clear message
The Bill's proposals are modest. They have been consulted
have taken place and must be taken forward—but that
change. I believe other moves are afoot—discussions
are making
up clubs for marketing reasons, with no respect for the
history or heritage of the club and its association with
the local community.
Despite new owners coming in with large sums of
money, it is the fans who have sustained clubs generation
after generation through thick and thin. It is the fans
who will be there for a long time after the owners have
gone. Sadly, it is too often the case that fans are ignores
on fundamental issues that directly affect them and
their club. A whole host of problems are faced by clubs
on a regular basis. As has been mentioned, Blackpool
supporters have recently expressed serious concerns
about the running of their club and have attempted to
take it over. Liverpool supporters have walked out over
their club upping ticket prices. Soon, the Football
Supporters Federation will hold a demonstration to call
on clubs to share the TV wealth by lowering ticket
prices and providing funds for lower leagues and the
grassroots. At Cardiff City, the club I support, the
owner changed the club's strip from blue to red against
the clearly expressed will of the supporters—for generations
the club has been known as the Bluebirds. I do not
believe we can go on like this. It is totally unacceptable.
Clubs are becoming more and more disconnected from
the communities in which they are based.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Many of us would
agree that football clubs are unlike any other businesses.
The backbone of any football club is its supporters—or
fans, if you like—many of whom have an emotional
attachment that lasts a lifetime. Too often, however, this
attachment is exploited by clubs. Ticket prices are pushed
up and owners attempt to change fundamental parts of
clubs for marketing reasons, with no respect for the
history or heritage of the club and its association with
the local community.

I commend the speeches from the hon. Member for
Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who is always
entertaining and informative, and my hon. Friend the
Member for Halesowen and Rowley Regis (James
Morris). I thank him for his contribution.
Unfortunately, the Government are not able to support
the Bill and are opposing it. We do not believe that
legislation is the right way to achieve our aim. The FA is
embarking on a review of its governance, and we hope
genuine progress will be made, including on giving
supporters greater representation on its decision-making
boards. In my future discussions with the FA, I shall
seek confirmation that this matter is being considered
properly, seriously and sensibly. I recommend going
forward on that basis.

2.30 pm
The debate stood adjourned (Standing order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 11 March.

Business without Debate

ENGLISH NATIONAL ANTHEM BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second
time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

TRANSPORT OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS BILL
Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second
time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

COMPULSORY EMERGENCY FIRST AID
EDUCATION (STATE-FUNDED SECONDARY
SCHOOLS) BILL
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question
(20 November 2015), That the Bill be now read a Second
time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 11 March.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE (YOUNG
PERSONS’ ENFRANCHISEMENT AND
EDUCATION) BILL
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question
(11 September 2015), That the Bill be now read a Second
time.
Hon. Members: Object.
Debate to be resumed on Friday 11 March.
FOOD WASTE (REDUCTION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

ON-DEMAND AUDIOVISUAL SERVICES (ACCESSIBILITY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AFFECTING HEARING OR SIGHT OR BOTH) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP REGISTRATION (MOTHERS’ NAMES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

WILD ANIMALS IN CIRCUSES (PROHIBITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

MESOTHELIOMA (AMENDMENT) (NO. 2) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

OFF-SHORE WIND FARM SUBSIDIES (RESTRICTION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

DEFENCE EXPENDITURE (NATO TARGET) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

CONVICTED PRISONERS VOTING BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

UK BORDERS CONTROL BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

HOUSE OF LORDS (MAXIMUM MEMBERSHIP) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

CROWN TENANCIES BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

WORKING TIME DIRECTIVE (LIMITATION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.

REGULATION OF POLITICAL OPINION POLLING BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.
Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March.
Citizens Convention on Democracy

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

2.34 pm

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): Our democracy is in a bad way, but, as I shall explain, we can all help to put it right.

People are the bedrock of our democracy, and if they lose faith and confidence in democracy as a system, we are all in peril, as was pointed out by the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in a report entitled “Do we need a citizens’ convention for the UK?” and published in 2013. You were a distinguished member of the Committee, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I believe that you signed that unanimously agreed report.

We need to consider this issue seriously, because it really does deserve our attention. The public have undoubtedly lost faith in our democracy, and if we are to restore that faith, they will need to be involved in its regeneration, and thereby feel ownership of it. There are many examples of the atrophy of our democracy: low turnouts at elections, poor levels of registration, instability in the Union, poor levels of devolution in England, dependent, begging-bowl local government, a less trusted electoral system, and the tainted funding of our politics and political parties. All that has increased public alienation from our hard-won democratic process.

Parliament and Government alone could not resolve this problem even if—and it is a large “if”—they wanted to do so. There is a growing view beyond this place, which I hope to present today, that the solution is to establish an independent convention that would view all the issues from outside the political bubble. I intend to deal with some of the nuts and bolts of that, and, for once, to leave aside the broader democratic arguments that I have, on other occasions, advanced repeatedly in the Chamber.

We are aware that such things have been tried before. Nice reports have been produced, but they have gone nowhere. It is essential that we do not repeat that exercise, but, instead, ensure that any convention reports are locked back into the political process in the House of Commons, and have a real political outcome. There is now a very obvious precedent for that. At the time of the referendum on separation in Scotland, the Union parties undertook to deliver a Scottish devolution Bill regardless of who won the general election. That was done as part of Parliament’s first business after the general election, and the Bill is about to become law.

A similar model would work for a citizens convention on UK democracy. It would require party leaders and senior parliamentarians who were representative of the majority of the electorate to undertake now, and publicly, to put the draft Bills produced by the convention into the parliamentary process after the 2020 general election, if they were elected. Some leaders may feel unable to commit themselves to that immediately, but it is important for the door to remain open to them and their parties so that they can join the conversation as it becomes irresistible, as it undoubtedly will. It is essential that the biggest event concerning our democracy takes place as a drive and motivate the process, and to discipline and inspire politicians to keep the pledge of parliamentary decisions on the outcome of the convention in 2020.

Let us get the ducks in a line. First, there must be a commitment on the political endgame from senior politicians. Secondly, there must be the establishment of a convention serviced by an impartial and respected team, whose non-party credentials would enable it to proceed to the third phase: the drawing in of the initial charitable funding to get the show on the road.

Once the convention was set up, it would of course have to decide its own agenda, but my expectation would be that the subjects it would report on would include: reviewing the powers and membership of the second Chamber; examining the voting system at parliamentary, devolved and local levels to encourage greater participation in public life; reviewing the position of local government in relation to the centre; considering the question of devolution for England; examining the legal recognition of constitutional provisions including individual rights; looking at the way in which the parties and our democratic institutions are funded; and any other relevant democratic issues that might be recommended by the convention as its work progresses. These are deliberately broad and vague areas, in order to enable the convention to develop its own priorities, having listened to the biggest public consultation exercise in British political history. Nothing, from electronic voting to a federal structure for the United Kingdom, should be precluded at this point.

The composition of the convention will be an important matter. I suggest that there should be about 100 persons, a majority of whom should be members of the public, and that they should be selected scientifically, perhaps by a respected polling agency. In addition, a minority of citizens convention delegates would represent political parties, voluntary organisations and other appropriate groups. It is important that there should be no command and control by politics; rather, there should be a bridge back into politics so that any recommendations can be taken seriously and tested at that level.

The whole convention, at UK, national and regional level, should be chaired by respected and diverse individuals. A chairs’ panel similar to the one that operates in this House could include representatives of faith and non-faith, former judges, interested businesspeople and celebrities, with a good gender and diversity mix. This would also help to stimulate public interest in the debate on the future of our democracy. Obviously, the composition of such a convention is of the utmost importance, and the applicant for funding must devise a structure to enable all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom to participate fully. An agreed number of participants with institutional support of their own—relevant universities, for example—could perhaps lead the debate in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as in a number of regions in England, such as the south, the midlands and the north.

The working of a citizens convention would start with meetings held in the nations and regions of the United Kingdom, interspersed with national plenary meetings of the convention itself. This is not new territory; we need not be frightened of this. Even in recent history, we can draw on the experience of Ireland, Ontario, Iceland, British Columbia and of course Scotland in the very recent past.

The convention would have to be supported by a secretariat led by an experienced and esteemed academic institution drawing on non-partisan expertise from other
academic institutions throughout the land, in order to commission reports and proposals and, ultimately, back those up with draft Bills on each of the recommendations agreed by the convention. Again, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be familiar with that concept because the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee did exactly that in creating the first draft written constitution with the hallmark of Parliament on it and the accompanying Bills. That would enable us to see exactly how these matters were going to progress through the parliamentary process.

The secretariat would be charged with supplying background for the debates, pulling together preliminary ideas and moving forward with the national convention towards recommendations and decisions. Given that we now have five-year Parliaments, we could take two years or so to make this process open, transparent and participative, building up a momentum and excitement across the nation, including in every school, college and university and every branch of every political party in the Union. Every single issue group could put forward their point of view in this open process. Every interested organisation, indeed every individual, could mirror the citizens convention structure to feed in their own ideas and run their own high-quality consultations outside the convention’s own organisation.

It is essential that political parties, other than offering their very strong support for the creation of this convention, for the end game in making it real, and for proper funding, do not contaminate the impartiality of the start-up or the secretariat, as they must be seen to be absolutely non-party political and non-partisan. However, once the convention is up and running, political parties and every other organisation will be free, and indeed encouraged, to let rip to involve an ever-widening circle of people.

It is often said that the US constitution was created by 40 white guys in Philadelphia. The citizens convention, which would aim to remake our democracy, should have at its heart creating an agenda written by millions of founding fathers and mothers throughout the United Kingdom. For that to happen, the convention will have to go way beyond the normal stalemate processes that currently pass for public consultation. An immense technological leap is needed to reach individuals and organisations by, above all, maximising communication and engagement online. We did that in the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, certainly in terms of the parliamentary process, engaging many, many more people than had ever been involved before, but that needs to be a pinprick compared with how we can involve people in deciding the sense of direction for their democracy over the next few years. This should be carefully worked up using initial funding. We have time to get this right if our target is to put proposals before a new Parliament in 2020.

Much hard organisational work would be needed to make this convention a success, but it would be driven by the mission of putting to a new Parliament in 2020 a set of Bills for consideration. Although support and participation from a majority of political parties is essential to keep the process running, that support would mean not unthinking acceptance of the Bills put to Parliament, but the normal process of amendment, scrutiny and decision making by a new Parliament—a Parliament that has gone through the experience of the public moulding these proposals—with a mandate for change. The public, having been involved in moulding the proposals, would take a very close interest in the outcome, driving it to fruition and ensuring that there are no delays.

It is time for a citizens convention to be created in the United Kingdom to ensure that there is a resurgence of faith in a democracy that is built and endorsed by the British people. Let us get on with it.

2.48 pm

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) on securing time for this debate and on giving us such an interesting and informative exposition of his views, although I do not share his feeling of impending constitutional peril. I hope that it will be helpful to him if I set out the Government’s position on the idea of holding some form of constitutional convention.

Although I have enjoyed considering all the constitutional conundrums that these sorts of debates throw up, I have to be clear with the hon. Gentleman that the Government have no plans to establish a convention on democracy. There are two broad reasons for that position. First, the pragmatic and evolving nature of the UK’s constitution means that it is completely unsuited to a convention. Secondly, the Government’s focus must be on getting on with, and delivering, a fair and balanced constitutional settlement for the people across the UK.

Mr Allen: I agree wholeheartedly with the Minister that it should not be for the Government to set up a citizens convention on our democracy; in fact it would be almost the exact opposite of what we need. Rather than the Government, just one political party or even Parliament, doing that, it should come from outside this place and involve the population at large.

Mr Wilson: I am grateful for that clarification, but I need to put on the record the wider Government’s position on this matter. To elaborate on the first reason that I gave the hon. Gentleman, I would remind him that the UK constitution is characterised by pragmatism and the ability to adapt to whatever circumstances in which it finds itself. The genius of that arrangement is its ability to deliver stable democracy by progressively adapting to changing realities. A static form of convention, deciding constitutional matters once and for all, does not fit that British tradition, which is one of evolving and adapting in line with people’s expectations and needs. Our unique constitutional arrangements make possible agility and responsiveness to the wishes of our citizens. We in government believe that those wishes are very clear—a desire to be part of a strong, successful Union that recognises and values the unique nature of each of our individual nations that form that Union.

On the second reason for not holding a convention, I would remind the hon. Gentleman that the Government are busy delivering on their commitments to provide further devolution and decentralisation to the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. It is absolutely right that we prioritise getting on with the job that we
were elected to do—to work for a coherent constitutional settlement that provides fairness, opportunity and a voice for all. To that end—

Mr Allen: I am using the fact that we have just a little bit of time to engage the Minister, and he is taking it in good spirit, as always. May I first make it very clear that I congratulate the Government on what they have done on devolution in England; I have done so several times on the Floor of the House. Great progress has been made and I believe that even more progress will be made before 2020.

To return to the question of whether we can carry on as we are, in the Scottish referendum we did come within, I think, a couple of hundred thousand votes of the Union breaking up. There is currently, obviously, a serious debate about our future inside or outside Europe. A million people went off the electoral register very recently. There are many examples of why this is quite a difficult moment, and why perhaps an outside look at the way we conduct ourselves in the House and the Government might actually be quite beneficial to all Governments, all Parliaments and all parties.

Mr Wilson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his recognition and kind words about the reforms that we have taken forward since 2010 and are continuing to take forward in this Parliament. As I said at the start of my comments, I really do not feel that sense of impending constitutional peril that the hon. Gentleman describes. What this Government are trying to do with our constitutional reforms will strengthen the Union by creating a fair and balanced settlement. Whether or not the hon. Gentleman agrees that we are doing it in the right way or quickly enough, that is what we are trying to achieve.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Scotland. We are delivering further devolution to Scotland and Wales, and the fresh start agreement for Northern Ireland. We are creating some of the most powerful devolved legislatures in the world and it is fair that that devolution is now balanced by measures that we have introduced. The hon. Gentleman rightly credits the Government with addressing the English question—the West Lothian question, as it is often known. We are also devolving greater powers away from Whitehall to cities and regions, driving local growth in areas that have the strong governance now and the capacity to deliver. I know that the hon. Gentleman is very keen for his own area, Nottingham, to receive some of those powers and some more of those city deals. At the same time, we are holding a referendum on our renegotiated membership of the EU, for the first time in 40 years giving the people of the UK the chance to get involved and have a say on the matter.

We do not believe that all these important changes, which are designed to hand power back to people, should be delayed by the establishment of some form of convention. As the hon. Gentleman said, the process would begin only in 2020, if we were lucky. We do not want to wait until then to get on with the job that we have been elected to do now. As my colleague the noble Lord Bridges pointed out in the other place, there is little agreement on the scope or composition of a constitutional convention, so perhaps we would need a convention on a convention before we could get started. Judging by the experiences of other countries—the hon. Gentleman mentioned a few—conventions often deliver little of substance. For example, the recommendations of the conventions in British Columbia and Ontario were rejected when they were put to the public in referendums. In Ireland, of the 18 recommendations made by the Irish constitutional convention, only two were put to a referendum and only one passed. We could spend a lot of time on achieving very little.

In evidence to the Lords Constitution Committee, my colleague the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who is responsible for constitutional oversight, made the all-important point that what matters about the constitution is that it works, not that it has been neatly drawn up and is theoretically pure. Hence the Government are very much focused on ensuring that the UK’s constitutional arrangements work for all our citizens, in a Union based on fairness, friendship and mutual respect.

I do not want to suggest that we are against reform of our democratic institutions or constitutional debate—categorically, we are not. Our programme of constitutional reform, from new devolution settlements to metro mayors and English votes for English laws, shows that we are delivering our electoral pledges to reform the way our democracy works in these areas, as the hon. Gentleman has rightly acknowledged. There will always be opportunity for debate and discussion about the UK’s constitutional arrangements in this House. At the heart of our representative democracy is the sovereignty of Parliament, and people look to Parliament to debate, scrutinise and legislate. Constitutional matters should be no exception.

Mr Graham Allen: I think that the Minister is approaching the end of his remarks, so I will take this opportunity to jump in yet again. I commend the fact that the Government are consulting the people on the European question. However, given that that is taking place, surely there is no contradiction in the Government not initiating a constitutional convention, but allowing an external citizens convention to engage the public, just as the Government are rightly doing on the European Union, and seek their views on a whole number of other issues. It would not be a Government convention, so it need not wait until 2020; it could be created in a matter of months by leadership and stimulus from outside. That process could be going alongside the reforms that he has outlined, some of which I strongly welcome, as he knows, allowing the public to have a say as well.

Mr Wilson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the clarification. Since 2010, the Government have consulted the people of this country on a number of occasions. In 2011, for example, there was the referendum on the alternative vote and the EU referendum is coming up shortly. Those are important ways of consulting the public about these highly controversial issues.

We are doing other things that I have not yet mentioned—for example, the boundary review and individual electoral registration, which are important parts of making sure that everybody’s vote in this country is equal. All constituencies will be roughly equal as far as the number of constituents is concerned so that everyone’s vote has an equal weight in a general election. That is an important reform. I do not know whether this is true of the hon. Gentleman, but some Members from his party do not feel that equal votes are an important part of those reforms.
Mr Allen: It was the all-party view of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee that equality of votes can be achieved on a more sensible basis. If constituencies have to be 5% either side of the average constituency size by number of constituents, several hundred constituencies will be seriously disrupted, and that will affect Members of all parties. If the variance from the average can be up to 10%, just a handful of seats—perhaps 30 or 35—will be seriously disrupted. That is one of the reasons why colleagues in the last Parliament felt that the proposed boundary changes were not sensible. The Select Committee unanimously came forward with what we thought could be a consensus view: to get closer to an average, but not so inflexibly that massive disruption took place between communities and natural boundaries. The Minister has enticed me, but I am sure I will be called to order if I say much more.

Mr Wilson: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Reading into what he said, I do not think we are going to agree on boundary changes or equal votes.

On English laws, I should say that there have been concerns about how the system is working in Parliament and some of the procedures that we introduced back in October. Those procedures are still very much in their infancy. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government will review them later this year, drawing on the work of the Select Committee and the Procedure Committee.

Mr Allen: May I make one final intervention?

Mr Wilson: The hon. Gentleman will have to be quick.

Mr Allen: May I say how generous and typically good spirited the Minister has been in giving way so many times? If we have a citizens convention inspired from outside this place, will he not rule out the possibility that the Government would be one of the participants and put a view to that convention?

Mr Wilson: I do not think I can answer that today. I have made the Government view clear. I hope that my setting out of the Government’s position and explanation of why we do not see the need for a convention on democracy have been helpful. I am confident that at least some of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman wants to be discussed are either being addressed or will be by the end of this Parliament; as I have said, there are lots of initiatives at the moment.

I end by congratulating the hon. Gentleman again on securing this debate and thanking him for allowing us to discuss these important issues.

Question put and agreed to.

3.4 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 23 February 2016

[NADINE DORRIES in the Chair]

Under-occupancy Penalty

9.30 am

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regional effects of the under-occupancy penalty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Dorries.

Our debate today on the regional impact of the bedroom tax is important and comes on the back of the Government’s recent judicial review defeat in the Court of Appeal, where it was determined that the bedroom tax discriminates against victims of domestic violence and the families of severely disabled children. I pay tribute to campaigners throughout the country who have put considerable energy and effort into challenging this iniquitous tax and raising public awareness of the Government’s continuing attempt to defend the indefensible. People such as Paul and Susan Rutherford have led the charge in one of the Court of Appeal cases on behalf of their severely disabled grandson, Warren, and Alan Lloyd of Cardiff Against the Bedroom Tax gives voluntary help to victims of the bedroom tax in my constituency of Cardiff Central and across south Wales by preparing and presenting appeals. I spoke to Alan Lloyd yesterday as he was on his way to appear at yet another tribunal to present an appeal on behalf of a woman whose long-time home is at risk because of the tax.

It is clear from the number of hon. Members present here today that the impact of the tax remains an important issue to many people and is not limited to those who pay the tax itself. The Opposition have opposed the bedroom tax since its introduction. Since this grossly unpopular Conservative and Liberal Democrat policy was forced on the public, exactly what we warned would happen has happened. The bedroom tax is not working; it is not achieving the aims that the Government set out to implement; and it is hurting some of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society and giving them a problem that is absolutely no fault of their own.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend, who has been a lawyer for many years, for bringing this important issue to the Floor of the House. Normally, people adhere to Court of Appeal judgments, but in the case of the bedroom tax, the Government are once again ignoring what the court said. In what way—the right, decent and honourable way—should the Government deal with the Court of Appeal judgment and listen to what is happening to the thousands of people out there who are suffering as a consequence of this now unlawful and illegal tax?

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Can we keep interventions short and not make speeches, please?

Jo Stevens: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The honourable thing would be to accept the decision of the Court of Appeal, but instead the Government are proceeding to the Supreme Court, where a decision is expected at the end of this month or early next month.

The bedroom tax and the tripling of tuition fees for students are two of the most painful scars left by five years of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition, and I will take every opportunity to continue to remind the House that the bedroom tax would never have been introduced without the eager help of the Liberal Democrats, including my predecessor. Nearly 500,000 households and almost 750,000 people have been hit by this cruel policy. Two thirds of the households affected by the bedroom tax include a person with a disability. The tax impacts on 60,000 carers—people who undertake demanding and challenging responsibilities and are punished for doing so. Some 57% of those who have to pay the tax have had to cut back on household basics such as food and heating—things that we all take for granted. The bedroom tax has had a corrosive effect on many different households, including the single parent who needs a spare room for when their children visit as part of agreed contact visit arrangements following separation or divorce; grandparents who help with looking after their grandchildren, allowing parents to manage shift working and other working patterns, or following family breakdown; and people with severe disabilities who use their spare room for their medical equipment or care, such as kidney dialysis.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): This issue is big in my constituency of Hackney South and Shoreditch. There is an invidious part to this tax. If two children are of an age when they are supposed to share a bedroom, but one is within reach of their next birthday, when they would qualify for their own bedroom, the family are hit by the bedroom tax. So it is a fluctuating tax that hits people particularly hard.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend makes a very good point; the tax increases uncertainty. People cannot budget. Their circumstances change and the fluctuating nature of the tax impacts on them more heavily at different times. Then there are victims of domestic violence and rape whose lives are at risk and need the protection of a panic room.

The particular focus of this debate is the regional impact of the bedroom tax, and I want to outline its impact on my constituents in Cardiff Central and more broadly within the nation of Wales, where 31,217 people are affected by the tax. Across Wales, just under 500,000 people live in social rented accommodation. The tax has had a huge impact, affecting proportionally more housing benefit claimants than anywhere else in Great Britain. Some 46% of claimants in Wales pay the tax, compared with 31% for the UK as a whole. In Cardiff, 3,015 households currently pay the tax, and nearly 500 of those live in my constituency of Cardiff Central.

The cost of the bedroom tax to each household affected will be £3,500 during this Parliament. I am sure I do not need to explain to most hon. Members what £3,500 means to the families in our constituencies, especially the poorest families who visit our surgeries every week. That £3,500 would otherwise be spent on basic necessities such as food, heating, clothes and shoes. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
claimed that the bedroom tax would encourage societal movement. However, when the bedroom tax was introduced, it affected about 3,500 households in Cardiff, and only just over 100 smaller properties were available for people to move into. I readily admit that maths is not my strong point, but even I can work out that that sum does not work.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. She knows that Northern Ireland did not implement the bedroom tax, although it has cost us financially not to do so. We looked at the issues that she has rightly highlighted, especially those affecting our older generation. In the first place, we did not have the housing stock, but, from a moral point of view, we felt that the hardship was simply too great to impose on older people.

Jo Stevens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which again shows the iniquitous nature of the bedroom tax.

Therein lies the truth about the bedroom tax and its impact and the number of properties that are available for people to move to. The Government knew before they introduced the policy that insufficient smaller properties were available for people to move to. That was the picture right across the country. Even if we gave the Government the benefit of the doubt about their motives before implementation, their own interim report on the bedroom tax after implementation revealed that the policy was not meeting its key aim of freeing up larger council properties. Only 4.5% of affected tenants have been able to move to smaller accommodation. At the same time, with just 4.5% of people able to move and be rehoused, 60% of people affected were in arrears within the first six months of the introduction of the tax. The policy is simply not working. People are not able to move to smaller accommodation because that accommodation simply does not exist, so long-standing, reliable tenants who were previously able to budget and pay their rent regularly now cannot pay it and have built up significant arrears.

Meg Hillier: In parts of London we are seeing people pushing to get two-bedroom properties because they are frightened they will be hit by the bedroom tax, but that also reduces, if there was availability, the stock for people to move down to, if they have the extra bedroom, so it causes a squeeze in both directions.

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend makes a valid point.

The most vulnerable have been hit the hardest and, in the words of the Lord Chief Justice and his colleagues just a few weeks ago, the Government’s “admitted discrimination” in the judicial review cases to which I referred earlier “has not been justified by the Secretary of State”.

We now have a farcical situation in which the Government have appealed that decision and the legal costs of pursuing the appeal are likely to be greater than the amount it would cost them to exempt all victims of rape and domestic violence with panic rooms who are paying the bedroom tax. I can conclude only that the Government would rather pay money to lawyers than to rape victims. I challenge the Minister to justify that action.

I think I can predict that, when he responds to the debate, the Minister will say that the Government have made additional funding available to local authorities in the regions and in Wales in the form of discretionary housing payments, but my local authority, City of Cardiff Council, has had its DHP funding cut by more than 26% between 2013-14 and 2015-16. The regional impact of Cardiff losing more than a quarter of its DHP funding has been hard, so it is disingenuous to argue that the DHP system justifies the bedroom tax.

At the same time as imposing the tax and relying on DHP as justification, the Government are cutting DHP funding. Their own report, which they sneaked out in a huge data dump on the very last day of the parliamentary term in December 2015—obviously in the hope that no one would notice—admitted that 75% of bedroom tax victims did not get DHP; that three quarters of those hit by bedroom tax were cutting back on food; that only 5% had been able to move; and that 80% regularly ran out of money.

The policy implementation of DHP has also been called into question. Evidence on its use has raised serious questions about local authorities adopting different practices, leading to allegations of a postcode lottery. There are references to disabled tenants—particularly those living in specially adapted properties—struggling to get DHP in some areas, and needing to submit repeated applications, with the consequential uncertainty and anxiety. That is not to mention the exclusion of people with lower levels of literacy.

This debate is not the first time that DHP and its impact on disabled people has been raised here. As long ago as 9 April 2014, five Welsh Government Ministers wrote to Lord Freud to call for an exemption from the bedroom tax for disabled tenants who had had adaptations made to their homes. They cited issues with DHP as one reason why such a broad exemption was necessary. They said:

“Disabled tenants cannot easily up sticks and move home. They should be exempt from these reforms and should not be left to rely on help from the discretionary housing benefit system...Our analysis of the discretionary housing payments system shows that demand far outweighs the number of applications being approved. In the first half of the financial year 2013/14 demand increased by around 260 per cent compared to the same period a year earlier in 15 Welsh local authorities.”

Cardiff’s 26% plus cut in DHP funding, coupled with the increase in applications, presents another one of those stark sums that even I can work out. It simply does not add up to have households with disabled tenants having to pay the bedroom tax if that cannot be offset through DHP because DHP funding has been cut. It is another example of the Government’s policy hitting hardest those who can least afford it.

Tomorrow, we have an Opposition day debate on another of the policy responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions: the adverse impact on around 2.6 million women of the speeding up of the state pension age. I know from discussions with constituents that many of those being advised and represented in bedroom tax appeals in my constituency are those very same women who are adversely affected by the changes to the state pension age. They are also women who are disabled or carers, so there is a double, triple or quadruple whammy on women. As with so many of the Government’s policies, it seems that women are bearing the brunt yet again.
It is time for the Government finally to accept that the bedroom tax is a bad policy. In the words of David Orr, the chief executive of the National Housing Federation, it is: “an unfair, ill-planned disaster that is hurting our poorest families”. It does not work, it causes severe hardship and it hits the most vulnerable, so I say to the Minister: please, listen to the public. It is time for the bedroom tax to be binned.

9.44 am

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I welcome this debate, which was secured by the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens).

We already know that the bedroom tax is nothing more than an ideological attempt to reduce the housing benefit bill and make better use of social housing stock by penalising low-income households deemed to be under-occupying their homes, but the problem of under-occupation will not be solved by shuffling people around. That will do absolutely nothing to resolve the underlying problems, which we all know are related to the supply of affordable housing.

A house is not just somewhere we live: it is a home. For all the people it affects, the bedroom tax can mean having to move out of the place that they have lived in for many years, where they raised their children. They have to move away from friends, family, schools, work and, in some cases, their support networks. Each and every one of us is emotionally attached to our homes, and people in social rented accommodation are no different. Just because someone does not own their house, that does not mean that it is not theirs.

The reality is that the under-occupation penalty affects thousands and will hit the most disadvantaged members of the community. Is it really working? The Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York tested the Department for Work and Pensions’ assessment of the impact on housing benefit costs and found that the expected savings might have been overestimated. The increased post-implementation costs faced by local authorities and the third sector should be taken into account in the overall assessment. Research carried out by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the National Housing Federation concluded that housing associations would consider their bedroom tax in the overall assessment. Research carried out by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the National Housing Federation concluded that housing associations would therefore be liable for the bedroom tax on the under-occupied property they were in the process of downsizing.

We must consider not only the effects of the bedroom tax but the associated impacts, such as tenants being unable to move to smaller properties because of rent arrears; an estimated 46% of tenants reporting having to cut back on heating; landlords stating that some tenants face severe poverty and are unable to pay the shortfall; and the risk of homelessness. All that causes stress and worry and affects tenants’ health and wellbeing.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Lady touched on the issue of arrears. Thankfully, Northern Ireland is exempt from this policy—at some considerable cost to us—but in many instances elsewhere there are vulnerable people, particularly the elderly, who find themselves in a very difficult situation, with minimal arrears, which are going to be compounded if this policy is continued over the next year and the year beyond.

Corri Wilson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. People find themselves in a vicious circle and can never see the end. That is the problem. In other words, we are putting people through absolute misery for nothing.

As we have heard, the Government tell us that discretionary housing payments are available to tackle the shortfall, but Shelter says that that provision is already overstretched. With such extensive reforms to welfare, a shortage of affordable housing and drastically rising rents in the private sector, the reality is that there is only so much that discretionary housing payments can cover. They are a mere sticking plaster and will not solve the problem. Even the House of Lords has deemed the welfare reforms a step too far, causing the Government embarrassment. Worse still, the UK is, shamefully, the first country ever to be investigated by the UN in relation to the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The UN is currently looking at our welfare policies for the disabled.

Before the Scottish Government invested millions of pounds to alleviate the bedroom tax in Scotland, many people in my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock were a thrown into turmoil by the policy, with some tenants receiving eviction letters that caused unnecessary anxiety and worry. We should not be spending our already diminishing budget on mitigating Westminster austerity policies. That money should be spent elsewhere. Meanwhile, the Scottish Government will ensure that housing continues to be a priority by building affordable housing, creating jobs and boosting our economy. I am pleased that the Scottish Government have committed to abolishing the bedroom tax as soon as they have the powers to do so. I ask the Tory Government to think again and to put the needs of people back at the centre of their welfare policy.

9.49 am

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), a fellow Welshwoman, on securing this debate.

This is a contentious issue of great concern to many people in my constituency. The bedroom tax is discriminatory and punishing. I want to share two short stories. The first is of Megan Wheatland from Bonymaen in my constituency, whose husband passed away in January 2013. He was of pensionable age and Megan was not; therefore, she was liable for the bedroom tax on the three-bedroom house she shares with her teenage daughter. Megan pays £11.85 a week for a small box room. Because of this, she is unable to pay for the extracurricular activities her daughter would like to take part in. She worries greatly that her daughter is missing out on all the other things that her teenage friends do. It really is an issue for Megan.

Then there is Sarah, a single mother with two children. She suffers from severe depression and has an arched spine. She struggles to engage socially and has suicidal thoughts. Because of this, her two children have been taken into care. Now Sarah is paying the under-occupancy penalty for a house that she should be sharing with her two children. It is an absolutely appalling situation.

We have heard about DHP, but it only kicks in after tenants have taken steps to downsize or—God forbid—take in a lodger. Some people who take in a lodger lose out
on other benefits, because the rent on that room is classed as extra income. I am worried that taking in a lodger when there are children in the house is potentially dangerous, because it means that people are effectively taking a stranger into their home.

If disabled people have to move to smaller properties to avoid paying the bedroom tax, there is the inevitable cost of making adaptations. Surely supporting those who pay the bedroom tax—or, better still, scrapping it—would be a better use of public funds. It is estimated that 10% of disabled people renting properties live in homes specifically adapted to their needs. The cost of adapting a smaller property—or, potentially, a larger property—to suit the personal requirements of the new tenants surely outweighs any income gain from charging for the extra room in the first place. Of course, people can always move to the private sector. In Swansea, an above average number of homes were built between 1919 and 1944, but 15% of those old houses contain category 1 hazards, meaning that they have failed basic health and safety standards.

The Government do not hold data on how many disabled people are affected by the bedroom tax, so I contacted my local authority. I knew the number would be high, but I was shocked by just how high it is. In Swansea, the bedroom tax is paid on a total of 2,467 homes, of which 1,138 are in my constituency. Of the total number, 1,129 people paying bedroom tax are in receipt of at least one of the following benefits: attendance allowance, disability living allowance, personal independence payments or severe disability living allowance. That means that in Swansea a staggering 45.7% of the people paying the bedroom tax are considered to be disabled. The DWP’s evaluation of the removal of the spare room subsidy, which it published in December 2015, estimated that 75% of claimants have either a long-term illness or a disability, and they are living in homes to which the bedroom tax applies.

Historically, social housing policy in Wales has focused on creating sustainable communities and enabling families to become established, so there is a shortfall of one and two-bedroom homes. The Welsh Government’s pattern book for new social housing development requires landlords to build lifetime homes, so social landlords generally see one-bedroom homes as an inflexible and ineffective housing solution. The bedroom tax contravenes the principle of a lifetime home. Those in social housing at the start of their tenancy will have very different commitments and requirements from those they will have further down the road. The bedroom tax therefore creates a transient housing pattern, forcing continual relocation to suit housing needs. That is in direct contradiction to the concept of lifetime homes. The effect will be to damage communities, as they lose the momentum to develop as communities. If a resident is short term, they will not be there long enough to engage with the community and get active in social groups.

I go back to my original point: the bedroom tax is discriminatory and punishing. It financially punishes those forced to pay it and it discriminates—

[Carolyn Harris]

Jo Stevens: On the point about the bedroom tax financially punishing people, does my hon. Friend think that it causes people to go to payday lenders such as Wonga and take out loans with extortionate interest rates to survive?

Carolyn Harris: I certainly do. I have casework involving people who have taken out payday loans from Wonga and other organisations and have been unable to repay them without not paying their bedroom tax. It is a Catch-22.

The bedroom tax financially punishes those forced to pay it. It discriminates against communities and individuals, and makes them unable to gel and enjoy stable, sustainable and adequate housing in a community where they can nurture and mutually support each other, and be part of a productive citizenship and community enterprise.

9.56 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on securing this debate.

The spare room subsidy, or the bedroom tax as it is more commonly known, is causing stress and hardship across the country. It is the most unfair and pernicious tax since Margaret Thatcher’s poll tax. We are here to debate the regional impact of the tax, so I will outline some of the issues it is causing in my constituency and in the south Wales valleys more generally.

The principle of providing larger properties for families and smaller properties for single people and couples is understandable. People often decide for themselves to move to a smaller property when their children leave home or their circumstances change, but that is a choice. Unfortunately, there are not many one and two-bedroom properties in many communities in my constituency, so people affected by the bedroom tax must decide either to stay in their property—thereby incurring a financial penalty that places great strain on their ability to manage—or move to a smaller property in a village or community some miles away.

Before being elected to this place, I was cabinet member for housing at Caerphilly Council, which covers a third of my constituency. In that role, I met a number of people who wished to remain in the homes they had lived in for many years. They did not want to move to a smaller property miles from their family and friends. Unfortunately, the strain of paying the bedroom tax in addition to their utility costs and household bills meant that they often had little money left to put food on the table.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend is rightly highlighting the practical difficulties and the unfairness of the policy. Does he think that the fact that there is not a single Government Back Bench present suggests that there is not widespread support for its implementation, even if it is Government policy?

Gerald Jones: As my hon. Friend says, the vacant chairs on the Government side of the Chamber speak volumes.

I know that the Government will say that they have provided discretionary housing payments, but that is only a temporary fix to an ongoing problem. I would
like to reiterate the practical difficulties of moving miles away from family and friends. Many communities in the south Wales valleys are geographically isolated, which, coupled with public transport challenges in semi-rural areas, means that people often feel very lonely and isolated if they are moved to unfamiliar surroundings away from their families.

Last week I spoke to representatives of voluntary organisations that work with people affected by poverty and the welfare changes. I was told the story of a lady who, after being affected by the bedroom tax, was forced to move from her home village to another village some miles away. The isolation caused her to become depressed, which led to her taking her life. Tragically, that is not an isolated case. It is the reality of what can happen and is happening as a result of this unfair tax.

I have talked to the local authorities and housing agencies in my constituency, and I have heard about a number of situations that are causing great concern, not least to the tenants themselves. In one such case, a couple who are joint tenants of a two-bedroom house are under-occupying by one room and are thus affected by the bedroom tax, which reduces their housing benefit entitlement by 14%. They are on the transfer list and are eager to move to any one-bedroom property. They both have health issues and have lived in the same close-knit community all their lives. Staff at the council housing department have visited and have applied for discretionary housing payments to assist the tenants in the short term. The tenants are concerned about how they will pay the charge, because they are trying to repay rent arrears that have accrued on their account. They would like to stay in the same area, but, as I outlined earlier, the local authority have few one-bedroom properties in their areas of choice.

I recently spoke to staff at my local citizens advice bureau in Merthyr Tydfil who told me about the many people who come through their doors on a regular basis. People have nowhere else to turn. Such clients often have several other significant issues going on in their lives and, to add to that, they are now in rent arrears due to the bedroom tax. These people could lose their homes, leading to massive consequences. For those who are physically or mentally disabled, it could bring about even more severe issues, such as homelessness, suicidal thoughts, substance misuse or further debt. It just becomes a downward spiral.

In parts of my constituency, the demand for three-bedroom properties is not great. The local authority often advertises them for rent in the hope of getting tenants, yet people are being forced out of these properties and into smaller homes, creating more vacancies. I appreciate that that is not the case everywhere—certainly not in larger cities—but today we are considering the regional impact of the bedroom tax, and that is the reality in parts of my constituency. Of particular concern in my area is the view that the disability living allowance and personal independence payments should be disregarded when considering DHP applications. A recent court case resulted in a ruling of indirect discrimination when DLA or PIP is taken into account as income. It specifically quoted section 29(6) of the Equality Act 2010 and article 14 of European convention on human rights. The DWP’s discretionary housing payment guidance manual of February 2016 also refers to the court case. My local citizens advice bureau feels strongly that DLA and PIP should not be treated as income for DHP applications.

Another example involves a single tenant living alone. The tenant does not want to move, as he has lived in the property all his life and classes it as not only a council house, but a home. The property has three bedrooms and the tenant is affected by the spare room subsidy charge, which reduces his housing benefit by 25%. The tenant has to pay an additional £23 a week out of his welfare benefits to cover the charge, leaving him with £50 a week to buy food and pay for all other essentials, including utility bills. The tenant also has support needs, which are provided by his family, who live in the same area. Staff from the council have visited and applied for discretionary housing payments to assist the tenant in the short term. They also arranged for a food parcel to be delivered because the tenant was cutting back on food to pay the shortfall. The property was cold when the visit took place in late December because the tenant could not afford money for the prepayment meter. That is the reality of what is happening across our country.

Organisations such as Citizens Advice and others want to make a difference to their clients’ lives. There is a feeling that people are being penalised unfairly. With further reforms in the pipeline, many people’s ability to cope will become increasingly uncertain. I urge the Minister to take on board the real concerns about the bedroom tax policy and to recognise the hardship that this pernicious charge is causing. This charge—or tax; whatever you want to call it—is discredited, indefensible and should be abolished.

10.4 am

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): It was not my intention to speak, but today’s debate really brought back to me the reality of the Government’s merciless attack on the most vulnerable people in our society. It must be said and reinforced that the attack is mainly on disabled people. Of the 600,000 who initially suffered as a result of bedroom tax, 400,000 were disabled. I wonder whether the Minister, who is shaking his head, can clarify or indicate whether those figures are correct. If he can, it will be the first time that anybody has ever challenged them. I am sure that he will want to comment.

The bedroom tax is about ideology. It is nothing else than an attack on those who can least afford it. I wish the room was full of Government Members listening to my hon. Friends’ contributions, but that is unfortunately not the case. The Minister should be ashamed of what the Government have done. Those affected are disabled people and people who are already in poverty. They are not living a life of luxury; they are on benefits. The policy is increasing child poverty and pushing more ordinary people into poverty. I will say it again: the Minister should be ashamed of himself and of the Government for continuing with the policy. A court judgment only a matter of weeks ago stated that the bedroom tax was illegal and unlawful, yet the Government still pursue the matter through the courts. The policy represents a concerted attack on communities. The slashing of benefits does not help people at all.

I am unsure whether the Minister has seen the video, which formed part of the Daily Mirror’s campaign, about a 47-year-old individual who used to live with his
elderly mother and then his 49-year-old brother in a four-bedroom property that had been adapted for his cerebral palsy. The local authority paid £70,000 for the changes so that the man could wash in a walk-in shower, but the tenants fell foul of the bedroom tax, which they could not afford to pay. They ended up in a bungalow, where the man has to be bathed by his brother in an inflatable paddling pool in the sitting room. That is the sort of thing that the bedroom tax has reduced tens of thousands of people to. Treating disabled people like that is not something that a society such as ours should be proud of, but that is what the bedroom tax is about.

This debate is about what is happening regionally, and the situation in my constituency is pretty bleak. Even the Conservative MPs in my area have suggested that the bedroom tax is not working. Almost 40,000 people are affected by the deduction, and the £454,000 discretionary housing payment fund for 2015-16 has been totally used up and is no longer available, which is causing huge problems. In the past few months, 442,000 homes across the country have seen an increase in the bedroom tax from £14 two years ago to £15.27 this year. That is up more than 9% for people who can barely afford to put bread on the table—and hitting those who are already suffering even harder than the Tory Government thought would be the case back when the bedroom tax was introduced. It is an absolute outrage that the tax was introduced in the first place.

As a politician, I sometimes wonder where that emanates from, where it comes from. Someone has sat down somewhere and thought, “Well, we could claim money back from people who are disabled”—people who most need the money and who need the finances even to live. We are not talking about a life of luxury, but simply existence. Someone has sat there and developed the spare bedroom policy, “Oh, we’ll charge disabled people. There are 600,000 people out there who are living in a house or a bungalow or a property where they might have an extra bedroom. Why don’t we tax them?” Where does that come from? It is ideology.

Before people suggest that the Government were unaware of the consequences, they should please bite their tongues, because it is the finest brains in this country that devise policies on behalf of whichever Government, and they have been to the finest universities. They understand absolutely who will suffer as a consequence of whatever they put in place. That is the reality. This is a pernicious tax, which is focused on those less well off in society, mainly disabled people, and those who cannot afford it. That is the reason why it was introduced in the first place.

The situation in my area is exactly the same as that described by my hon. Friends. We have people who are looking to move because they cannot afford to pay the bedroom tax, but not enough properties are available. We have people now in rent arrears who have never been in arrears in their life, because of the bedroom tax. One of the big housing companies in my area has had an increase of 42% in rent arrears. These are proud people who are suffering. They have always made their way, but the burden of the bedroom tax has meant that lots of them are now in arrears. Latterly, rent arrears in the sector have increased to somewhere in the region of 50%.

All in all it is not a great picture—it really is not. At times we have got to tell it as it is, not pussyfoot around and talk about looking at different ways of doing things. The bedroom tax needs to be scrapped. If the Minister has anything about him, he would agree with the court judgment and scrap it as soon as possible.

10.12 am

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I had not expected to speak today, but I felt moved to do so because of the huge impact of the bedroom tax on my constituents. In Hoxton, on the Wenlock Barn estate alone, 74 households out of several hundred are affected.

We have heard from colleagues about the practical issues, so I will touch on some of those. Any policy that starts life with discretionary money provided by the Government as a workaround fund clearly does not stack up in the first place. The invidiousness of a discretionary housing payment when local government budgets are being slashed, and are expected to be slashed further in coming years, is an extra burden on the people affected. People speak to me about the bedroom tax with uncertainty and fear. Even if it does not affect them now, they worry that it will affect them in future.

In my constituency there is no housing stock to move to and no smaller homes that do not already have a huge waiting list. I have been elected in different roles for more than 20 years, and now is the worst time that I have ever seen for housing. My surgeries and those of my council colleagues are full of people desperate to find a home, but unable to afford one in the private rented sector in Hackney. Private rents are now unaffordable. In fact, in the private sector in my constituency, not a single three or four-bedroom property can be rented to meet the housing benefit cap. There is no alternative, and there is a huge waiting list for all social housing. The likelihood of being able to move to a smaller property in the same area, even through mutual exchange, is very slim.

While we are on the subject, will the Minister clarify an issue that came up in a Public Accounts Committee hearing a couple of years ago? Apparently, income from lodgers has no negative impact on universal credit and is completely disregarded. Will he clarify whether that is the case? On Wenlock Barn estate, were people minded or able to have a lodger—this might shock my colleagues from south Wales—they could charge £200 for a room on an estate so close to Old Street and the City of London. Having a lodger might be a solution for some of my constituents, but it is invidious for them to be able to do that because they are in Hoxton, close to Old Street and Silicon Roundabout—I suspect there is not the same opportunity for people in Swansea, Merthyr Tydfil or Cardiff. I am interested in the Minister responding on that point in particular.

As I said, the private sector provides no alternative, and even paying some social housing rents is impossible for many of my constituents on the minimum wage, even with the increases due in it. I remember a man who brought a kitchen porter to one of my surgeries. He was not very skilled—we all want to see people more skilled up in their jobs, but let us face it and be honest, a kitchen porter will probably not have an employer who
gives someone a significant amount of training and development opportunity. He was on the minimum wage and was asked by the Department for Work and Pensions to look for work in zones 5 and 6. That is not unreasonable, and he was certainly willing to work. His wife worked part time to help support the bringing up of their two young children. His extra journey time, however, meant difficulties with childcare times, and the extra cost of travel outside zone 2 to zones 5 or 6 was beyond him.

That grown man, who found dignity in work and wanted to find work again, was in tears in front of me in my surgery. He is only one example of the many others who have come to me hugely distressed. At the time he was not hit by the bedroom tax, which can be another worry for such people, but my point in mentioning him is to hammer home to the Minister that the Government need to see all their policies in the round. Many of my constituents have no financial resilience and do not have the opportunity to turn to friends and family for it, because their friends and family are in a similarly difficult position. They have nowhere to turn. They might be poor, but there is no poverty of ambition in my constituency.

Many people want to do well, to get jobs and to improve their lot, but those sorts of things keep them down, hammering them into difficult roles.

People who get jobs in local supermarkets, for example, are often restricted to 15 or 16-hour contracts. A number of them have expressed the concern to me, which I have passed on to one of the Minister’s colleagues, that they can never increase their hours to full time, although more people are being recruited part time. Many were pleased, some in their first job, and excited to be able to say to their children, “I’m off to work now”—real pride, doing all the right things and doing all the things that Government want them to do and that we know work for people—but then they could not get the extra hours. That causes real problems for them, including paying their housing bills, which is certainly completely impossible in the private sector anyway.

I have practical examples to show how the bedroom tax is simply not working. One constituent who came to see me was temporarily unemployed. Her eldest son had left home, so her three-bedroom social rented property was deemed too large. Her landlord was an active manager in trying to get her to reduce the size of her property, persuading her to move to a nearby two-bedroom property with a different social landlord. She thought that that was the right thing to do to avoid the bedroom tax. What she had not really clocked until she started thinking about work again was that the rent for the two-bedroom property is higher than that for the three-bedroom property, which is not unusual in the sector. She has struggled to find work that can cover the rent. She does not want to be reliant on housing benefit, but she will be costing the taxpayer in housing benefit partly because she has moved house. Had she stayed in the other property, it would have been cheaper for the taxpayer and better for her.

Another constituent, a single mother, is ambitious to get into work and training and to improve herself, but is at the moment unemployed. She has 15-year-old and 10-year-old boys. Under the rules, they are deemed to share a bedroom, so her three-bedroom property is considered too large. What does she do? Does she wait six months for the 15-year-old to reach his 16th birthday and accrue the arrears, or does she try to downsize in that time?

Those are the choices—if we can call them that—that people are having to consider day in and day out. They are not good choices. I have worked and campaigned on housing for more than 20 years and one thing I am passionate about is that a stable, secure home is the absolute basis for getting on in life. Without that it is hard to concentrate on studies or securing a job and that causes stress and strain to the individual and family’s mental and physical health. I suspect that those of us in the Chamber do not have that worry. I know that I can go home to my flat and that it will not be ripped away from me. I am not reliant on anyone but me to ensure that I can keep my home, but that is not the case for so many of my constituents.

An additional factor in London is that many households are reluctant to move into properties that meet their needs. Over the years I have had an increasing number of overcrowded families, but increasingly people, even those in two-bedroom properties, do not seek to get a three-bedroom property. It is true that it is hard to get one, but they know that if they got such a property and a child leaves home or their circumstances change, the threat is that they will be hit by the bedroom tax and that fear stops people from looking to move into the right sized property. There is not a hope of doing that in the private sector and the risks in moving to a larger property in the social housing sector are also an issue.

The Minister must remember that fluctuating employment is a real concern. Many of my constituents are on zero-hours or short contracts and their work and pay fluctuate. Many of them are in arrears because while they have been working, they cannot be sure that every week they will get the hours they need to pay the rent. They are so delighted when they do get a job. I had one woman at a surgery on Monday who had got a good job, but she was still paying off a couple of thousand pounds of arrears from when she had uncertain employment.

That is the reality of people’s lives. If the Government are really keen to promote social mobility, they need to give people at that moment in their lives a leg up to help them fulfil their proper ambitions of wanting to work and support themselves, but instead the Government are pulling the rug out from under people’s feet. I hope the Minister has considered the bedroom tax’s value for money and practicality and that he has asked his officials to look at the cost to the Exchequer, let alone the human cost. My fear is that the bedroom tax is ideological, dog-whistle-based politics that appeals to certain people in parts of the country where it is a distant, remote and probably unheard-of policy, but I am stopped on the streets of my constituency by people who want to talk about it, both those directly affected and those whose children are at school with people affected by it or those who live next door to people affected by it. There is general concern overall.

The poorest and most vulnerable are being hit from all directions and those without the financial resilience to cope have nowhere to go. The despair and depression that comes through my surgery door is the worst it has ever been. I hope the Minister is really listening and that he will go back with the concerns of hon. Members, which were made in a measured way. This is about not
just ideological party politics but people's lives, futures and opportunities. If he believes in opportunity, he needs to have a radical relook at this invidious tax.

10.23 am  

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Dorries, and to sum up the debate for the Scottish National party. Let me congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) on both securing the debate and speaking so powerfully about the policy's human cost and impact. I know that she has worked hard on that in her constituency.

Many pertinent points were made by the six Back Benchers who spoke in the debate. It has been referred to that no one from the Government Back Benches cared enough to come along and participate. That tells us everything about the Government's priorities and how they look on this issue. For the record, nine Opposition Back Benches have been present, but where are the Government Members? Why are they not taking this seriously? Where is their concern for the ordinary people up and down the country who have been affected?

The hon. Member for Cardiff Central talked about the legal costs of the appeal. The Government are quite happy to spend ridiculous sums of money defending an indefensible policy rather than doing the right thing. As she put it, it is money for lawyers rather than for the rent victims. She and others talked about problems with DHP. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) made the point that that is not working, a theme that came across from numerous speakers, so the Government must take the opportunity given by the debate to reflect on what happened at the Court of Appeal and stop this nonsense.

My hon. Friend and others talked about the policy's impact on the health and wellbeing of many people and, when we are talking about that, we are talking about people with disability. The most vulnerable in our society have been put under pressure. The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke movingly about the human cost to people in her constituency. We should listen to the stories of the people who have been affected so disgracefully. She said that it was both "discriminatory and punishing", which is exactly the point. That is why the Government must listen.

We had a moving speech from the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). Again, the point is that there is a lack of one and two-bedroom properties. Where in the name of heaven are people supposed to move to? If the Government in the rest of the UK had done what they should be doing and ensured a supply of affordable housing and social housing, perhaps that could have been addressed, but they certainly have not addressed that. We end up in a situation where so many people up and down the country—pride people, as was said—are in rent arrears. That is what the Government have done through their actions.

We heard from the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) who talked powerfully about the attack on the vulnerable in our society. We keep hearing the same stories—we would have heard others if other Members were in the debate—about the impact that the policy has had in constituencies up and down the country. Lastly, we heard the story from London, because this is a story about the impact on not just Wales, the north of England and Scotland but urban centres such as London.

I hope that the debate presents an opportunity to focus on what is a mean-spirited piece of legislation, which has ultimately led to the Government's defeat in the Court of Appeal. I say that it is mean-spirited, but it is worse than that. It is cruel. It seeks to demonise folk and those who are the most vulnerable in our society. That should shame us all, as the hon. Member for Wansbeck said, yet sadly it does not seem to shame this Conservative Government.

We can all reflect on the policy's results, but perhaps there is a clue in its name: the spare room subsidy. Here is the nub of the problem. We in Scotland see social security as providing a safety net, accepting society's obligation to look after the vulnerable among us, while we seek to deliver policies that are aspirational and deliver a road out of poverty. The Government take a very different view, with necessary support for the vulnerable seen as providing a subsidy. Who has ever heard the like? With that kind of approach, the problem is that the wrong decisions are made, just as has been done.

It is not about subsidy; it is about cutting the entitlement to benefits of people who desperately need them. What mentality sees a problem in that? It is little wonder that the Government are deaf to the cries about the impact of their policy on so many people. They should stop using such language as "spare room subsidy" and just come clean on what this is: a reduction in the incomes of some of the poorest in our society. That is all it is.

The Government want to fix the deficit and they are doing so by putting their hands in the pockets of the poor at the same time as doing a cosy, cut-price deal with the likes of Google. As we would say in Scotland, "It's the same old Tories." Thank heavens the Court of Appeal has intervened, but, for now at least, the Government still refuse to see sense. Even their own report, "Evaluation of Removal of the Spare Room Subsidy", in December 2015 found that the tax is a failing policy, hitting the most disadvantaged in society. It found that 55% of tenants affected by the legislation were in arrears. Where is the sense in a policy that creates such outcomes? Why will they not accept that it is wrong? They have made a mistake, so reverse it today—do the right thing! The effect of the policy is to push folk into ever greater debt, with all the difficulties that that causes. To many of the rest of us that is no surprise. The bedroom tax is after all a direct assault on the incomes of the disabled, the poorest and the most vulnerable.

The Prime Minister said at his party conference that he wanted a war on poverty—fine words. However, what we actually have is a war on the poor. In Scotland we have an SNP Government committed to abolishing the bedroom tax; and when the powers are passed to us we will take that responsibility. In the meantime, the Scottish Government have been mitigating the effects of the bedroom tax. We have a Scottish Government on the side of ordinary folk and a Tory Westminster Government punishing the poor, ignoring the social consequences of their actions and turning a blind eye to the Court of Appeal.

One of the major flaws in the Government's thinking was that those with spare bedrooms would move to smaller properties—a point that many have made in this
debate. That would be a big enough challenge in any part of the UK, but in a large rural constituency such as mine it is almost impossible. What are people supposed to do? Are people in Skye who have an extra bedroom, for example, supposed to move elsewhere in the highlands, and uproot themselves from family and friends? We have been revisited by Tebbit and his “on your bike” philosophy. Caring compassionate Conservatives? Give us a break. It is little wonder that the Tories are so decisively rejected by the people of Scotland. Of course, at the root of the issue is the austerity agenda, but in their lemming-like rush to reduce the deficit they refuse to acknowledge the pain and suffering inflicted through actions such as the introduction of the bedroom tax. Tory ideology is a cover for them to do their worst, and never mind the consequences. To use a saying of the Thatcher period, “If it’s not hurting, it’s not working.” Well, what the Government are doing is not working, but it is certainly hurting. It is time to make a change.

We all want to restore the country’s finances and we all want to reduce the deficit, but the question is what path we take. There is no argument based on economic literacy that suggests there is a need to get to a fiscal surplus in the current Parliament. Yes, progress has to be made, and the SNP demonstrated that the UK Government could increase spending by £140 billion in this Parliament and still have the deficit fall to around 2% of national income. That would be a balanced, sensible approach, which would allow for the removal of the bedroom tax and a more meaningful house building programme, for example. The issue is leadership, or in this case a failure of leadership, from the Government.

The Court of Appeal said that the policy was discriminatory and unlawful. I urge the Government to accept that judgment: show leadership and for once, Minister, do the right thing.

10.32 am

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms Dorries. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) and everyone who has participated in today’s debate. The speeches have been exceptional. As has already been mentioned, the lack of participation from the Government side is notable, and is hopefully a sign of embarrassment at a policy that is clearly not working.

The Government’s policy of reducing the amount of housing benefit payment to current social housing tenants who are deemed to have superfluous bedrooms—the bedroom tax as the Opposition call it—is deeply unfair, discriminatory and divisive. The fact that the policy was introduced for existing tenants who took out their tenancies based on the knowledge of how much they could afford, only to be told that their income was to be reduced, is unjust and unfair. Added to that, the Government’s inept handling of the housing market, with the lowest level of house building since the 1920s, means that there are not properties for people to move into. That just adds insult to the injury that people feel.

The latest figures for 2015 show that approximately 443,000 people are affected, with an average weekly income reduction of £15.27; that is more than £61 a month or £800 a year—up about 10% from what the Government originally estimated. As many people today have said, those figures are significant for families on low incomes. The bedroom tax is discriminatory because the Government failed to listen to claims that it would affect many older people, disabled people and their carers. As we have heard, two thirds of those affected are disabled, and more than 60,000 carers are also affected. It is also divisive, as it splits families and hits regions that have historically high levels of social housing.

The effect in Wales is significant, as we have heard, but in England the National Federation of ALMOs found a distinct north-south divide in relation to the percentage of tenants affected. One year after the bedroom tax was introduced, 13% of tenants in the north were affected, compared with 7% in the south. I wonder if that is really what we call the northern powerhouse.

The Work and Pensions Committee investigated what was happening with housing benefit and raised concerns about the reduction in the number of households affected. At the time there were few data on what was happening. As the Select Committee said in its report, the reduction “could be related to changes in household structure, moving house, entering work, or increasing hours” and “a result of claimants ceasing to claim because their entitlement was reduced to zero, or to such a low level...or because they were already in the process of moving.”

I must note the fact that that report was produced in 2014 and the Government have still not responded to it.

Professor Steve Wilcox indicated in his analysis that tenant moves prior to the introduction of the policy may have accounted for some of the reduction in the number of claims—in addition to the reclassification of bedrooms by landlords—but urged caution in interpreting the decline in relation to social sector tenants. However, the Government’s own evaluation which, as has been mentioned, was slipped out on the last day before the Christmas recess, gives an insight of the impact on people of the bedroom tax. It revealed that the majority of people originally affected by the bedroom tax were still affected nine months later. Of those still affected, only 5% had found work. Claimants were using savings, borrowing from family or friends or accruing debt to pay rent. The implication of accruing such debt is a downward spiral. It is impossible to overestimate the effect of having debt hanging round family’s necks. Three out of four families are having to cut back on essentials such as heating and food.

We have heard poignant constituency case studies in the debate, and I want to mention an example from a Barnardo’s project. A dad asked the staff for some nappies, and when the project worker attended the house to see how things were going she discovered that there were only biscuits and crisps in the cupboard and that the parents were missing meals to feed the children. They had not asked for help because they were too proud. That family’s example is a window into the reality of life for many people. We could see that situation replicated across the country.

The Government’s evaluation also reported that 55% of tenants were in arrears, contrasting with the National Housing Federation’s figure of 59%. The important thing is that the arrears of two thirds of them were not accounted for in the Government’s evaluation. As has already been mentioned, for some people, in some local authority areas, discretionary housing payments have helped where there has been a shortfall between rent and housing...
benefit, but the clue is in the name— it is a discretionary payment, not an entitlement. It is certainly seen as something for the short term, within a wider context where local authorities face significant cuts. Seventy-five per cent. have not had support in the form of discretionary housing payments. Their availability is a postcode lottery.

The recent Court of Appeal judgment agreed that the bedroom tax was indeed discriminatory against a domestic violence victim and the family of a disabled teenager. It was ruled that, in the two cases, the Government's policy amounted to unlawful discrimination. Although other Members have referred to them, I too want to mention Susan and Paul Rutherford, who argued that they needed a specially adapted spare room in their Pembrokeshire home to care for their disabled grandson Warren. Ms A, who is a single mother living in a three-bedroom council house fitted with a secure panic room to protect her from her violent ex-partner, also argued that that room was needed. We await the outcome of the Government's appeal to the Supreme Court at the end of this month.

The discriminatory, unfair and divisive nature of the bedroom tax is why Labour has consistently called for it to be abolished. I hope the Minister will recognise that and comment on why the Government continue to pursue this policy, which, as we have heard, is not delivering what it is meant to. It is not making the savings that were anticipated and it is certainly not freeing up family accommodation.

The Government have tried to regenerate the economy on the backs of the poor and disabled. Their modus operandi is about division and blame. Instead of denigrating claimants and our social security system, we should be recognising the importance and value of that system. Like the NHS, our social security system is based on principles of inclusion, support and security for all, assuring us of our dignity and the basics of life, should any one of us become ill, disabled or fall on hard times. The Government need to remember that and stop their attacks on the poor and vulnerable.

10.41 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), who made a passionate, informed and determined speech that was well received by her colleagues supporting her today. Some measured and well thought-out speeches have been made, and cases have been strongly put forward on behalf of each Member's constituents. I have worked closely with the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on a number of measures, and we have been able to find a lot of common ground and ways to move forward in a number of Westminster Hall debates, but I am afraid I am a little way from her arguments on this issue. I will try my best to answer as many of the points made as I can.

Let us first look at the history of this. One of the main thrusts of the opposition to this policy is that it is ideological and was dreamed up by the finest brains of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition. To be clear, it was the previous Labour Government who introduced this policy in the private sector. When challenged in the House in January 2004 on whether the policy would be introduced more widely than the private sector, the Minister then responsible said:

“We hope to implement a flat rate housing benefit system in the social sector, similar to that anticipated in the private rented sector to enable people in that sector to benefit from the choice and flexibility that the reforms can provide.”—[Official Report, 19 January 2004; Vol. 416, c. 1075W.]

Debbie Abrahams: Does the Minister recognise the point I tried to make in my opening remarks about this being a retrospective tax? It applies to tenants already in existence. There was a very different application for private sector tenants. The policy applies to current, existing tenants who had already budgeted for what they could afford.

Justin Tomlinson: I will cover in detail some of those points, but I cannot dwell on it too much. The Court of Appeal previously said that discretionary housing payments were appropriate support. Crucially, it was not about the wider policy; it was about just these very specific categories. In that particular case, those people were in receipt of discretionary housing payments, but that is an ongoing legal dispute.

Jo Stevens: In relation to the receipt of discretionary housing payments, is it not the case that the Rutherfords had been denied DHP in the first instance?

Justin Tomlinson: My understanding is that that is right, but they then got the money on appeal. This comes down to whether we should have discretion in the powers of local authorities or an exhaustive list of those who should be exempted. My view is that if we try to set strict categories, we will not be able to ensure with 100% certainty that everyone will be covered, because people—particularly those with unique issues—do not neatly conform to tidy boxes. If an individual falls just below the line, they will miss out; that is a crucial point. If it is black and white, there will be winners and losers.

Discretionary housing payments allow for everybody's individual circumstances to be considered and for a flexible multi-agency approach. For example, that approach could involve working with the police, social services and medical professionals. Underlying all those decisions is the public sector equality duty to ensure that the vulnerable in society are protected.

A number of speakers talked about support for the disabled, victims and those who are homeless. I will reel off some of the measures we have introduced to provide support in those areas: £400 million to deliver 8,000 specialist homes for the vulnerable, elderly and those with disabilities; a 79% increase, from £220 million to £394 million, in the disabled facilities grant, which helps about 40,000 people; £40 million for victims of domestic abuse, which triples the support previously in place, so that no one is turned away; £500 million to...
tackle homelessness since 2010; and £25 million a year to support disabled people living in significantly adapted accommodation.

I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is being generous with his time. What he is outlining is what the Government are having to put into place because the policy is quite simply wrong. How does he respond to the Court of Appeal saying that this policy is discriminatory and unlawful? Those are the words he must reflect on, and that is why he must do the right thing and scrap the policy.

Ian Blackford rose—

Justin Tomlinson: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that I have not yet finished my remarks, in which I will set out why I think trusting local authorities with discretion is far better than having an exhaustive list of exemptions. The people who would come up with that list may have the finest minds, but I am sure they would never cover all the people who should be covered. I do not wish to see people who should be protected being missed because of some sort of arbitrary winners and losers line. I will cover more of those points as I progress.

We must remember that it was the former Labour Government who first dreamed up this policy. The pretext for our introduction of this policy is that we had a quarter of a million households living in overcrowded accommodation and 1.7 million people on waiting lists in England alone. Members have talked about the casework they deal with as constituency MPs. I, too, have dealt with a number of similar cases, but I have also been into the properties of families in overcrowded accommodation who are every bit as angry as those whom Opposition Members have mentioned. Those people are in overcrowded accommodation while their neighbours have spare rooms in their family houses because their children have grown up and gone.

Ian Blackford rose—

Justin Tomlinson: I will make some progress and then take more interventions.

Members ask whether this is a popular policy. I can tell them that it is a very popular policy with the people on waiting lists. Some 820,000 bedrooms in social housing were sitting empty while being paid for by the taxpayer. Those rooms were being looked at enviously by families in overcrowded accommodation.

Meg Hillier rose—

Justin Tomlinson: I promise I will take more interventions, but let me make some other points first.

A small issue that will not generally have to trouble Opposition parties—that is the advantage of not being in government—is the financial aspect. Members asked whether this policy is saving money. It has saved about half a billion pounds a year, which is a significant amount of money.

Research has shown that social landlords are altering their allocation policies and are no longer putting single people into family-sized homes. In the first six months of the policy, around one third of developing landlords altered their build plans, and that figure is now up to 51%. There has been a reduction of more than 100,000 in the number of households seeing a reduction in their housing benefit award due to the policy since May 2013. There are a number of possible reasons for that. Landlords are not wrongly allocating single people to family homes. There are more one-bedroom properties—I will come on to the numbers on that—and there are people who have downsized. There are also more people either increasing their hours of work or finding work, and we are seeing around 200 people a week come off housing benefit as they are able to do that.

The evaluation report published last December showed that 20% of people affected by the policy had, as a result, looked to earn more through work. Some 63% of unemployed people affected said they were looking for work as a result of the policy, and 20% of people no longer affected said that that was because someone in their household had found work or increased their earnings. As I said, 200 people a week are coming off housing benefit completely.

We believe—I say this as someone who was a local councillor for 10 years—that local authorities remain best placed to ensure that discretionary housing payments are targeted at those most in need, based on local circumstances and working with a number of other agencies, so that there is a multi-pronged approach to providing support.

Since 2011, we have provided £560 million to local authorities and have already committed a further £870 million for the next five years. Since 2013-14, we have also allocated £5 million each year to help the 21 least densely populated areas across Great Britain, which addresses a point made by the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson). This additional funding aims to avoid any disproportionate impact on those affected by the removal of the spare room subsidy in remote and isolated communities.

Of the £150 million of discretionary housing payment funding that is being allocated to local authorities for 2016-17, £60 million is allocated by reference to the removal of the spare room subsidy. Local authorities are able to top up the Government’s contribution by an additional 150% in England and Wales, and there is no limit in Scotland.

The title of the debate on the Order Paper refers to regional effects, and there is clear evidence that regional areas are now adjusting to the removal of the spare room subsidy. Across all regions of England and Wales, the number of households subject to a reduction has fallen by between 14% and 26% since May 2013. In both the north-west and London, where the biggest change can be seen, there has been a 26% fall in the number of households subject to a reduction since May 2013. However, in Scotland, where discretionary housing payments have been used to buy out the policy, only an 8% reduction has been seen over the same period, and over the past year it has been the only region to see an increase in caseloads.

Ian Blackford: The Minister talks about Opposition Members opposing the measure. Actually, the Scottish National party is in government in Scotland and we are committed to getting rid of it, but at the same time, we are building more houses, because that is exactly what is required. The rate of social house building in Scotland is far in excess of what is happening in this country. This Government have a housing crisis, and that is what they should be addressing. What they should not be doing is
punishing the poor. Why do they not do what Scotland is doing, and abolish this measure and make sure that enough social houses are built?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, because it links nicely to the next part of my speech, which is about housing numbers. However, I gently remind him that Scotland is the only region that has seen an increase in caseloads this year. That is hardly a record of success. I urge him to think very carefully about that, because those are the people who are on the waiting list looking to get appropriate family homes, and the ones who support this policy.

On the supply of housing numbers, 700,000 new homes have been built in the past five years, including 270,000 affordable homes. Housing starts are at their highest annual level since 2007. More council housing has been built since 2010 than in the previous 13 years. The number of empty homes across England is at its lowest since records began and, crucially, we are broadening opportunities for people to access housing through schemes such as Help to Buy and the right to buy, along with a number of other measures.

Meg Hillier: The Minister made a point earlier about people being allocated oversized properties to start with. He has also talked about under-occupying by people whose children have left home. However, they are different from people whose life circumstances are fluctuating—their income has fluctuated; their children’s ages are changing. They are living in the home that they will want to continue to live in, and yet they have to go cap in hand to the council for these discretionary housing payments, which in my area are severely squeezed. Does the Minister not acknowledge that this policy really hits people at a point in their lives when they are trying to move out of that situation and get stability?

Justin Tomlinson: That was exactly the same thought process and debate that went on when the Labour Government introduced the policy in the private sector. They faced exactly the same challenges, and it was intended, had there been a general election win for Labour in 2010, for this to be done under that Labour Government. We have done it, but the difference is that they would be pensioners, and pensioners are exempt.

Debbie Abrahams: They would be pensioners, and pensioners are exempt.

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Member for Cardiff Central raised a point about Cardiff’s discretionary housing payments being cut. The overall funding will be £870 million over the five years, but that reflects the level of caseload. In Cardiff’s case, as the numbers have fallen, the funding will follow accordingly.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) raised a point about housing associations and their rent collection. The reports we have had back from housing associations are that rent collection is 99% on average, and 92% of housing association providers continue to report that, in terms of current levels of arrears in rent collection, they are within or outperforming their business plans. Of those that are in rent arrears, over 50% already were prior to the introduction of the spare room subsidy, although again we will continue to
work with housing association providers and local authorities to look at what further support might help to break that cycle.

A specific point was made about the impact relating to PIP and DLA. To quote the guidance:

“When deciding how to treat income from disability-related benefits such as Disability Living Allowance or the Personal Independence Payment, you should have regard to the decision of the High Court in R v. Sandwell MBC... In particular, you should consider each DHP claim on a case by case basis having regard to the purpose of those benefits and whether the money from those benefits has been committed to other liabilities associated with disability.”

In effect, therefore, that still remains part of the discretion.

In conclusion, the Government have taken action to protect the public purse and bring a spiralling housing benefit bill under control. The removal of the spare room subsidy has already saved over £1 billion since its introduction. We are protecting the most vulnerable by giving them access to direct housing payments if they need extra help to meet housing costs. The policy is encouraging people to enter work and increase their earnings and we are seeing better use of our housing stock. This is a welcome measure for those who are on the housing waiting list or in overcrowded accommodation.

10.58 am

Jo Stevens: I thank the Minister for his response and all my Opposition colleagues for their contributions to today’s debate. It is very disappointing that no Government Back Benchers were here to participate. Although I have listened to the Minister’s points, I do not recognise what he has said in the impact of the bedroom tax that I see every day in my constituency and which I am sure my hon. Friends do too. I ask him to take away the case studies, stories and points that we have made, and to review the policy again. It is iniquitous, unfair and discriminatory, and it really needs to go.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the regional effects of the under-occupancy penalty.

10.59 am

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered compensation for victims of the Canary Wharf bombing.

It is a pleasure to see you presiding over the debate, Ms Dorries. It is also very good to see the Minister, for whom I have the highest regard, in his place. I know that the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Justice have been passing or sharing responsibility for this issue among them. I am grateful that a Treasury Minister is here, because I think that this is a financial question. Some issues of compensation are an MOJ responsibility and some issues are a Foreign Office responsibility, but a number of the key questions that I want to ask relate to British financial policy, as I hope to make clear. I am grateful that the Treasury is represented here today to respond to the debate. To be honest, I do not really care which Department takes responsibility and responds. What the victims and I want to see is action.

Two weeks and 20 years ago today, the Canary Wharf bomb detonated. The bombing marked the end of a 17-month IRA ceasefire. It was recently the subject of an excellent BBC Four documentary, broadcast to commemorate the event, entitled “Executing the Peace”. The half-tonne bomb was left in a small lorry about 80 yards from South Quay station on the docklands light railway. It exploded at 19:02 GMT 90 minutes after coded warnings were telephoned to Dublin and Belfast media. Inam Bashir and John Jeffries died when the bomb went off outside their shop on 9 February 1996. Many more people were injured, a number seriously.

I have been trying for a number of years to assist the Docklands Victims Association to secure compensation for the victims who suffered, and are still suffering in many cases, and for the families of those who were killed. The Docklands Victims Association is not alone in seeking justice; many other victims are also trying to do so.

The starting point for all this seems easy enough. Semtex explosive was sold by the Czechs to the Libyan regime of Colonel Gaddafi. It then supplied that Semtex to various terrorist organisations, including the IRA. That Semtex killed and maimed people. But from there things get much less clear. To its credit, the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs—I am pleased to see its Chair, the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), in his place—is engaged in an inquiry trying to get to the bottom of this. I cannot do justice, in my brief remarks, to the evidence that it has already heard or the conclusions and recommendations that it will deliver, but its report, I suspect, will not be kind to successive British Governments over the last almost 20 years. I simply wish to ask the Minister why UK citizens have not been compensated, unlike citizens in the United States, Germany and France who were also victims of Semtex supplied by Gaddafi.

One of the most powerful statements that I heard in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee sessions was from Mr Jason McCue, representing victims in Northern Ireland. He said:

Canary Wharf Bombing: Compensation
“Victims...are front-line troops in the war on terror...We have a duty of care to them, and yet we do not seem to value them in our society, like others do—like the French or the Americans do. We do not give them that value; we do not give them that respect. We do not see the humanity in them, and their strength in the war on terror. There is no stronger counter-terrorism measure than a victim standing up.”

The question for me and many colleagues—a number are in the Chamber today—is not whether the victims should be compensated but how. There are several possible ways, and all have been mentioned in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee hearings, in which members are examining those ways and have suggested a number of parliamentary questions to tease out even more information on this very difficult issue.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this very important issue again on behalf of his constituents. The Docklands Victims Association is doing tremendous work and working with victims elsewhere whose victimhood came about as a result of Semtex supplied by Gaddafi. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will accept that Members from Northern Ireland fully support the campaign for compensation in this case, because it will mean compensation right across the board for many other victims as well. We fully support the case and wish him well.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that expression of support. He, too, has campaigned strongly on this issue for many years. This is a more general case; it is not exclusively about the Docklands Victims Association. Obviously, those victims are in my constituency, but many others across the country are also involved, and what we want to see is justice for them all.

I was exploring the possible ways forward. The first way forward would have been for the British Government to join a class action with the US Government in their claim for compensation. I would like to quote Mr McCue again. He said in response to a question from the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans):

“There was no reason why the British Government could not have, first of all, petitioned for the British citizens to be in it. There is nothing in American law preventing them from espousing a claim, which is the technical term for it, with another state to bring compensation for a class action. The Americans could have done it.”

A Mr Jury, another witness at the Northern Ireland hearings who was also representing victims, said:

“Can I add to that that the Libya Claims Settlement Agreement is a court-accepted statement of liability towards the UK victims? Under US law, there has been an acceptance of liability, and under judicial international comity, the UK courts would accept that anyway.”

Therefore there is, or at least was, the possibility of an international legal route to compensation, but my main question to the Government is why is there not, or why can there not be, a UK domestic route?

There have been reports that the UK Government have frozen Gaddafi or Libyan assets in UK banks. I suspect that the Treasury was behind that, which is why I have targeted the question in this debate at Treasury Ministers. The amount of funds is not clear. Some commentators suggest £900 million; others suggest that it runs into billions of pounds. That raises a number of questions for the Minister, of which I gave him notice last evening. I must congratulate the Minister’s private office, because it was still emailing me at half-past 8 last night to try to get to the bottom of some of this.

First, do such frozen accounts exist and, secondly, what are they worth if they do exist? More importantly, there are international legal precedents that enable frozen assets of a terrorist or dictator—in this case, Gaddafi—to be used to pay compensation to victims, so my third and most important question, to which I will return at the end of my remarks, is why do the UK Government not go down that route?

A third route is now apparently being explored. An article in The Daily Telegraph on 16 January quoted the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who, to his credit, attended the memorial service in my constituency two weeks ago, on 9 February. He did not tell me that he was coming, but it was good to see him there anyway, and other parliamentary colleagues. The article stated:

“Tobias Ellwood, a Foreign Office minister, told The Telegraph that he had met new Prime Minister designate of Libya, Fazey el-Sarraj, and raised the case for compensation with him in person.”

The hon. Gentleman was quoted as saying:

“We will certainly make the case with the Libyan government in order to pursue this as best we can.

As soon as there is a government to work with I am planning to facilitate bringing the victims’ groups and the Libyan authorities together. It is for the Libyans themselves to say whether or not there would be a case for a request for compensation.”

There are, therefore, three possible ways to compensate victims: join a class action in the US, use interest from frozen assets in the UK or get the new Libyan Government to cough up.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for initiating this debate, because it enables me to raise the case of Charles Arbuthnot, who is a constituent of mine in Holbrook and whose sister Jane, a 22-year-old WPC, was murdered in the Harrods bombing. I have had extensive correspondence with the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), and it seems to me that there is still not explicit acceptance that American citizens were compensated by the Libyan Government. Previously, there would be reference only to direct compensation, for example for the Lockerbie bombing, and not to compensation for those cases in which the Semtex was supplied.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I know that this is one of the key issues that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is looking at, because evidence was given about the way the Americans secured compensation. That is why I am raising with the Treasury the question whether the frozen assets and the interest on them could be made to compensate the docklands victims, as well as the Harrods bomb victims and others from Northern Ireland. It is a key question.
The Canary Wharf bombing victims do not care which is best. All they want is to secure the justice that they have been denied for more than 20 years for them and for other victims. Victims are represented by other colleagues, a number of whom are here today. Just yesterday I had two emails about this. One was from the office of the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison) on behalf of Felicity Prazak, whose husband died on flight LN1103. The other email was from my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who raised the case of Mina Jadeja, a victim of the Harrods bomb.

This is not, and has never been, about the money. However, media accounts of payouts for IRA members—for example, the reports on 30 January that £1.6 million was paid to a republican kidnap gang—can only add to and intensify the sense of injustice and frustration for the victims of the Gaddafi Semtex. Successive UK Governments have failed victims. I was a Minister in both the Tony Blair and Gordon Brown Administrations, and evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee suggests that the Blair Government were more interested in the glory of bringing Libya in from the cold, closing a scheme in Northern Ireland, but the same provisions were not available for the hundreds of victims in mainland Great Britain.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman share my profound disappointment in the evidence given to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs on 11 December by former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who said that he did not pursue compensation because, clearly, compensation was available? There was a scheme in Northern Ireland, but the same provisions were not available for the hundreds of victims in mainland Great Britain.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point, and I am sure that will be a focus of the report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, of which he is a respected member. I am not able to develop the powerful point as much as I would like to, but I am sure that the Committee will do so in due course.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. I was at the memorial service last week with him and a number of other people. On the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, we find it frustrating that former Prime Ministers Blair and Brown seem reluctant to give evidence on this very point. If we have to go to America to speak to people there to find out the truth, we certainly will.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee makes a powerful point that reinforces the concern I raised about the way the Blair Administration dealt with the situation. The Committee was also told that the Brown Government only became interested when the flak started flying over the Megrahi case, when he was being released back to Libya. The Foreign Office then set up the dedicated unit for victims, which, initially, was very enthusiastic, and the current Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Witney (Mr Cameron), made some very positive statements about helping the victims when he was Leader of the Opposition. Notwithstanding all the reluctance, tokenism and lack of a conclusion, the victims just want results.

To return to the original question I asked a few minutes ago, I obtained this debate to ask a Minister from the Treasury whether there is a route, through frozen assets in the UK, to end the misery and delay. In my view, that is a Treasury question. If there is not a route, why not and when will the victims see justice? My final quote is from Mrs Hamida Bashir, whose son, Inam, was killed aged 29 at Canary Wharf. She wrote in correspondence:

“we do not require or will not accept any financial compensation for the loss of my Inam. However, due to the murder of Inam and John”

John Jeffries—

“we do feel a tremendous moral obligation to support all those who have been left severely disabled. A victim such as Mr Zaoui Berezag who desperately needs your help as he is blind, paralysed, has the mental age of a small child and is an amputee. He is cared for by his wife Gemma within a modest council home in East London.”

What further eloquence do the Government need?

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. From the evidence received by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, it seems that we do not actually care about the victims. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is about time that we sat down and started looking at those who really need help?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman because his intervention brings me to my concluding comments. This is not a party political issue, as is demonstrated by the fact that members of various parties are here expressing concerns about the issue. We all want the Government to address the issue and to come up with a solution, which successive Governments have not done over the past 20 years. The question affects constituencies across the country, including in Northern Ireland, which I have not really mentioned. The victims have been waiting too long.

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee will require a formal Government response to its report when it is published. Today, the Government have a chance to signal further commitment not only to the victims, who they have failed, but to the country, by acknowledging that the frontline troops fighting against terrorism are innocent civilians and by assuring us that when those civilians suffer at the hands of terrorists, their Government are ready to ensure that the sacrifice is acknowledged and the debt paid. So far, after 20 years, that sacrifice has not been acknowledged and the debt has not been paid. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

11.15 am

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Damian Hinds): I am grateful for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and commend him for securing this important debate on a subject that is of particular importance to his constituents and on which he has campaigned consistently. I also commend the hon. Members from four different political parties who are attending this debate.

The docklands bombing of February 1996 was an horrific event—a black day for London and the United Kingdom. I add my condolences to all those whose lives
were affected by the terrible events that day. The horror will not be forgotten. Two people died and 39 were injured, some permanently. It was a breaking of the IRA ceasefire and a failure of humanity. The involvement and support of the Gaddafi regime in this and other events marks a low point even in Gaddafi’s reign of terror. It is right that those whose lives were affected by these senseless bombings seek redress and compensation, and we will do what we can to ensure they get it. I know how important this issue is to the hon. Gentleman and to other hon. Members who are here today.

The hon. Gentleman specifically asked about the Libyan assets frozen in the UK, and the potential use of those to compensate victims of Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism. To answer that, it is important to set out the background of how those assets came to be frozen in the UK, and to explain the limits on the use to which they can be put.

In 2011, the United Nations took action against those involved in, or complicit in, ordering, controlling or otherwise directing the commission of serious human rights abuses against persons in Libya. This included, among other measures, the imposition of an asset freeze against a number of individuals and entities, including Muammar Gaddafi and some members of his family. On 2 March 2011, the European Union implemented these asset-freezing measures through regulation 204/2011, which has direct effect in the UK. The UK Government have no additional domestic freezing measures under the Libyan sanctions regime.

The approximate aggregate value of funds frozen in the UK under the Libyan financial sanctions regime is just under £9.5 billion. It is very important, for the purposes in which the hon. Gentleman is interested, to recognize that the whole Libyan Government are not subject to sanctions. A small number of entities associated with the Libyan Government are subject to asset freezes. The names of those entities are published in the Treasury’s consolidated list of financial sanctions. They include the Libyan Investment Authority and the Libyan African Investment Portfolio, which are subject to partial asset freezes, which means they are free to deal with new funds generated after 16 September 2011. The Libyan Government additionally hold further unfrozen funds in the UK and elsewhere. Therefore, existing financial sanctions would not prevent the Libyan Government from agreeing compensation with victims and making payments to them from unfrozen funds.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Given that it could be some time before there is a genuinely workable Libyan Government, why could this Parliament not—the Minister recently said this—one at a time before there is a genuinely workable Libyan Government, why could this Parliament not—give way?

Damian Hinds: I will come to that. As for the financial sanctions that are in place, an asset freeze means that the assets of the individual or entity must be frozen where those assets are. The funds continue to belong to the individuals and entities listed under the sanctions regime and are not seized or held by the United Kingdom Government. The funds remain frozen in the bank account they were in at the time of designation and, for individuals and entities subject to a full asset freeze, interest may be credited to those accounts provided that the interest is also frozen. The sanctions prevent any person from dealing with those funds or making funds available to the individuals or entities listed under the sanctions regime without a licence from the competent authority—in the United Kingdom, as the hon. Gentleman rightly identified, the competent authority is Her Majesty’s Treasury.

Access to frozen funds can only be licensed in accordance with the grounds set out by the United Nations and the European Union, and there are seven licensing grounds applicable to this sanctions regime. To summarise, the grounds allow for payments in the following categories: first, for the basic needs of the designated person; secondly, for the legal fees of that person; thirdly, for fees for the routine maintenance of frozen assets; fourthly, for the extraordinary expenses of the designated person; fifthly, for the satisfaction of judicial or administrative orders enforceable in the EU; sixthly, for humanitarian purposes; and seventhly, for obligations arising under contracts prior to the imposition of sanctions.

To clarify further, a Treasury licence would not compel a payment to be made, but would simply provide that the payment would not be a breach of financial sanctions. It is clear that none of the licensing grounds would allow the Treasury to select a frozen account at will and require that funds be paid from it to a third party.

James Cartlidge rose—

Kate Hoey rose—

Gavin Robinson rose—

Damian Hinds: I am conscience of the time, so if all three hon. Members will allow me, I want to ensure that I get through what I need to say. If time allows, I will of course be happy to give way.

Although the entities designated under the Libyan financial sanctions are generally ultimately owned by the Libyan Government, they are entities in their own right and are governed by boards of directors who make decisions about the use of their assets. If the Libyan Government came to an agreement with victims to pay compensation, and came to an agreement with individuals or entities that their frozen funds should be used to pay that compensation, the Treasury would be in a position to consider such an application for a licence under the current framework. However, depending on the licensing ground that applies, approval for granting the licence would also need to be obtained from the United Nations.

Although I very much understand and share the concern of hon. Members for the victims of the docklands bombing and other Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism, I am afraid that the legal framework relating to financial sanctions is focused on preserving the funds for the benefit of the Libyan people and does not allow the UK Government to use them as we wish, no matter how worthy or how important to us and to all hon. Members a cause may be. Indeed, the UN Security Council has repeatedly made clear its determination that, when sanctions are lifted, frozen assets must be made available to, and
for the benefit of, the people of Libya. The Security Council has held that position in a series of resolutions going back a number of years.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse asked about the 2008 US-Libya compensation settlement. In May 2008, it became clear that the US and Libya were proceeding on a bilateral agreement to settle outstanding claims. The then Government made representations to the US and Libyan authorities to include UK claimants on the list of recipients. Unfortunately that proved not to be possible, mainly because international and US law does not allow the US to espouse the claims of foreign nationals. Furthermore, the Libyans made it clear that they had answered questions about their support for the IRA in 1995 and that they considered the matter to be closed.

Important questions have also been raised about the similarities and differences between this case and the case of the Lockerbie bombing, in which victims were paid compensation. I stress that there are important differences between the two cases. First, the Lockerbie bombing was an act of terrorism directly committed by agents of the Libyan state, not indirectly through IRA terrorists with Libyan supply.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will continue.

Secondly, in the case of Lockerbie, the Libyans approached the US Government tacitly acknowledging their guilt for the atrocity. Thirdly, Gaddafi wanted something in return from the United States, namely readmission to the international fold, from which his actions had excluded him. Finally, the Lockerbie claims were supported by a UN Security Council resolution. Above all—this is important—it is highly unlikely that a future Libyan Government would acknowledge themselves as guilty in the same way as Gaddafi, the individual. The Libyans see themselves as victims of Gaddafi, not the bearers of his legacy.

We believe that the best approach in these difficult cases is to support and facilitate contact between victims and the relevant Libyan authorities so that claims can ultimately be settled directly. Unfortunately, the current political and security situation in Libya makes it difficult for victims, their families and representatives to pursue their claims. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office already provides facilitation support to victims, their families, legal representatives and campaign groups where it has been requested and is appropriate. However, it is a long-standing decision for the Government not to espouse private claims, so we do not provide funding for victims campaigns. As the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse may be aware, there has recently been important progress towards the establishment of a new Libyan Government. The Presidency Council has announced a revised list of Government Ministers, and the next step is for the House of Representatives to endorse that list and the Government programme. We urge the House of Representatives to do that without delay.

The hon. Gentleman may also be interested to know that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister with responsibility for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), raised the issue of redress for UK victims when he met the Prime Minister-designate in November 2015. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Minister will continue to raise that issue in our engagement with the new Libyan Government, and he will encourage the Libyan authorities to engage with UK victims, their families and representatives, including those seeking compensation, once stability returns and our embassy reopens. The Minister will also meet UK victims in March, and I know that he will also be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the issue in greater detail, if the hon. Gentleman would like to do so.

There is going to be time, so I will happily give way to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson).

Gavin Robinson: I thank the Minister for giving way, which I greatly appreciate. He has fairly outlined the restrictions associated with the asset-freezing sanctions. One issue with which the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has wrestled is the representations made, at either EU or UN level, when the sanctions were imposed to advocate on behalf of victims, recognising that there were outstanding requests for compensation. I know he is not a Foreign Office Minister, so if he is unaware of the representations that were made, perhaps he could ask those questions and report back to the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), or to me.

Damian Hinds: I will have to write to the hon. Gentleman with the detail in answer to that question, but of course the sanctions regimes are not unique to the UK and are governed by international law and UN and EU conventions. A great wrong was inflicted on innocent victims on that day in 1996, and a key part—

Kate Hoey: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will make progress.

Kate Hoey: You have three minutes.

Damian Hinds: Will the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse be responding, Ms Dorries?

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): That is up to you, Minister. If Mr Fitzpatrick is going to wind up, you will have to stop very soon.

Damian Hinds: I want to make sure that the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse has brief time at the end.

A great wrong was inflicted on that day, and clearly part of the responsibility lies with the Libyan dictator, Gaddafi. At some stage, the Libyan people will want to come to terms with what was done in their name and consider the issue of reconciliation and compensation for victims, both Libyans and foreigners. When they do, we will have something to offer from our experience in Northern Ireland, and we will of course also push for the inclusion of Gaddafi’s UK victims in any compensation scheme.

11.28 am

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful for this opportunity to wind up the debate. I am grateful to the Minister for his comments, and I am grateful for the attendance of a number of colleagues, including my former colleague.
from Thurrock, Andrew MacKinlay, who has been supporting the victims for many years. I am grateful to the Minister for supplying new information on the £9.5 billion in frozen assets—that figure was not previously clear to me. I hope that information is of assistance to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

I did not expect today’s debate to provide a conclusion; I sought another little piece of the jigsaw to create a bigger picture and to help the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to produce a report that will get the Government to a position where, hopefully, they can bring the matter to a satisfactory conclusion. This debate has not concluded the matter, but I hope it is another step towards a conclusion.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am
Sitting suspended.

Community Pharmacies

[Mr Gary Streeter in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered community pharmacies.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. In a letter to community pharmacies on 17 December, the Department of Health discussed the potential for far greater use of community pharmacies and pharmacists. The letter refers to the role of community pharmacists in preventive health, support for healthy living, support for self-care for minor ailments and long-term conditions and medication reviews in care homes, and as part of a more integrated local care model. That is exactly the right direction. As an MP representing a Cornish seat where every effort is being made to integrate health and social care, I see community pharmacists as essential players in a new national health service equipped to meet the demands placed on it by modern society.

Westminster Hall debates are rarely secured in order to praise the Government and celebrate all that is good. I would love to be able to do so, but—wait for it—in the same letter to which I just referred, the Department set out its plans to reduce its funding commitment to community pharmacists by £170 million. Therein lies the problem. We have a front-line NHS service that is valued and depended on and able to embrace new clinical responsibilities and meet the demands of an ageing population, but it is unsure about its future.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern? As Members of Parliament, we all, I suspect, refer constituents to pharmacy services, because we know the impact that that has on reducing the pressure on the NHS. If we cannot refer them to smoking cessation services, cholesterol testing and blood pressure testing, the NHS and hospitals will have to pick up the burden.

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention. That is exactly the point that I hope to make, particularly for independent pharmacists in rural areas, where it is much more difficult to access acute services and GP practices.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman share my concern? As Members of Parliament, we all, I suspect, refer constituents to pharmacy services, because we know the impact that that has on reducing the pressure on the NHS. If we cannot refer them to smoking cessation services, cholesterol testing and blood pressure testing, the NHS and hospitals will have to pick up the burden.

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention. That is exactly the point that I hope to make, particularly for independent pharmacists in rural areas, where it is much more difficult to access acute services and GP practices.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman ought to see that that is true across the whole country. In urban areas, people are finding it more and more difficult to get appointments with their GPs and are going to accident and emergency. The best way to relieve that pressure is to encourage more people to go to our well-resourced local community pharmacies, maybe even rather than chain pharmacies.

Derek Thomas: That is absolutely right. The community pharmacist is part of the solution, not part of the problem, in what we want to do for the NHS. I hope to make the point in my speech that we need to do all we can to support the development of community pharmacists rather than take away money that they need.
Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Urban and rural areas share those problems. It is because people will only wait for so long for GP appointments—my hospital has exceeded waiting times for more than a year—that there is pressure on community pharmacists. They are stepping up to the plate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that they are being let down by this cut, when they are trying to do their best?

Derek Thomas: I hope to make the point that we need clarity about how the money will be found, if it must be found. I believe that there are other ways to save money, particularly involving the use and waste of drugs.

Community pharmacists are unsure about their future and unclear what support they can expect from the Government. The letter sets out the £170 million reduction in support for community pharmacists and asks them to prepare for the cut, but gives little detail about where the money will be cut, who will lose and what services can no longer be funded.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that local pharmacies are part of the fabric of local communities? That is particularly the case for independent pharmacies, which are embedded in communities and whose owners and staff often come from those communities. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what impact assessments have been undertaken in terms of health and economic and social wellbeing by individual constituency.

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention, but I am concerned that the hon. Lady might have read my speech, and I have not yet put it on my Facebook page. In my constituency, I have several community pharmacists, and I am not sure that I have too many. It is simply that my patch is large and includes areas of social deprivation, which has an inherent impact on health. A car journey from the north to the south of my constituency takes an hour. The journey from the most westerly point to the most southerly point takes an hour and nine minutes. In a rural area such as mine, community pharmacists provide invaluable access to the NHS and invaluable support to vulnerable people.

To follow on from the hon. Lady’s helpful intervention, over and above their obvious healthcare roles, I see community pharmacies’ input into society as comparable to that of post offices, police community support officers, libraries, local churches or chapels, local pubs, village shops and our postmen and women. They all play an important part in local communities. They are the glue that holds communities together, the people and organisations that know when things are not as they should be, and the people who look out for our elderly, the sick and the vulnerable. Although it is difficult to put a price on the work they do, without those people and institutions, society would be a poorer place and the added strain on public services would be significant. It is perverse that we judge reducing support for services such as community pharmacists to be a saving.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this timely debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. The loss of pharmacists’ expertise and experience and their knowledge of the people who come in and out could be enormous if pharmacies such as the Whitworth family pharmacy in my constituency are forced to close as a result of this initiative.

Derek Thomas: I think we all share those concerns. I am pleased to have secured this debate, so as to give people an opportunity to share their experiences in their own constituencies.

Reform of community pharmacies is not something that we can afford to get wrong. Many of the community pharmacies in my constituency are independent businesses that have been established for decades. A wrong move by the Government now might make those community resources unviable. We all know that community pharmacists provide important services, including the safe dispensing of medicines. They are often the first port of call for people with minor ailments and health concerns, and are a key support for elderly and vulnerable patients in the community.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): General practitioners in my constituency are under significant strain. Although no one is against sensible savings, does my hon. Friend agree that nothing should be done to undermine the excellent job done by community pharmacists in diverting patients from primary care, or to add to the burden on hard-pressed GPs?

Derek Thomas: That is absolutely superb—my next line is: “Community pharmacies have a vital role in giving advice and in diverting patients from GPs and emergency departments,” exactly as my hon. Friend said. In tourist areas such as Cornwall, they take their share of the extra demand during the height of the season. Most recently, my local community pharmacists administered flu jabs to increase uptake. Pharmacies regularly get prescriptions to patients out of hours when no alternative is otherwise available, and Cornwall has led the way, with ground-breaking work in enhanced services. That is an example of how community pharmacists are very much part of the solution to integrated community health provision.

Healthwatch Cornwall recently surveyed Cornish residents about access to community pharmacies. Some 69% of participants said that they regularly visit their pharmacy, and 74% of those felt comfortable talking to the pharmacist about their health, while 78% felt well informed by their pharmacists when taking new drugs and 93% said that the pharmacist was polite and helpful.

One constituent of mine, a retired doctor, Professor Dancy, wrote to me as follows:

“I am a warm supporter of Nigel, our local pharmacist, and proud to be so. He is always ready to help when I forget (as one does at the age of 95) to re-order a medication, and when my doctor is unavailable, or just pushed for time, I do not hesitate to ask Nigel for advice, which I follow with a confidence that is always rewarded.”

Community pharmacists are highly trained and trusted healthcare professionals, qualified to masters level and beyond. Their knowledge base covers far more than just drugs, making them the ideal healthcare professionals to relieve pressure on GPs and other areas of the NHS. Equally importantly—perhaps even more importantly—community pharmacists are welcoming change and embracing new clinical opportunities.
[Derek Thomas]

However, the proposed funding cut will not sustain the transition from a supply-based service to the more clinically focused service that the Government desire and our patients deserve. Cuts will discourage progress and can only result in small, independent and much-loved businesses failing, at the expense of patients, the public and the wider NHS.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In York, the local authority has made cuts to smoking cessation services, as well as NHS health checks, and the community pharmacists I have spoken to have said that they see their future role as filling some of those gaps. However, with further cuts to community pharmacy itself, where are people meant to go—back to queues in GP surgeries?

Derek Thomas: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. That is exactly why we are having this debate. I want the Government to examine the value of community pharmacists and to consider how they can do some of the work—in fact, a large part of the work—that would save money for NHS acute services.

I am well aware that there is a need to secure better value for money in areas of the NHS. Over the weekend, I met four community pharmacists and they all talked of the opportunities to make savings that they have identified. They are willing and able to see more patients. Pharmacists give free, over-the-counter advice to thousands of people every day, promoting self-care and diverting patients from GP and urgent care services. However, it is estimated that £2 billion-worth of GP consultations a year are still being taken by patients with symptoms that community pharmacists could treat.

Pharmacists want to have a greater role in prescribing drugs, so as to reduce waste. Last year in Cornwall alone, £2 million-worth of unused drugs were returned to community pharmacists to be destroyed. Pharmacists are best placed to reduce this waste. They want to do more to support people with mental illnesses; they are keen to provide continued care of people with diabetes and other long-term conditions; and my local community pharmacists want to work with the Department of Health to improve services, engage in health and social care integration, reduce drug waste and improve access to records, in order to support the giving of prescriptions.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): On that point, does the hon. Gentlemen agree that what is needed is a joint, co-ordinated approach to planning investment and implementing change, in partnership with national and community pharmacy bodies, rather than pushing things through at a great pace?

Derek Thomas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. In my experience so far of looking at this subject, I have found that those in the pharmacist community do not feel that they have been properly consulted or engaged with. Pharmacists believe that they have many of the solutions that the Government wish to see.

Before I conclude, I will read one final letter that I received on Monday from a GP in my constituency. Dr Rebecca Osbourne writes:

“As you will no doubt be aware, General Practice is facing a crisis with too few GPs managing an ever-growing demand. Demand for appointments outstrips availability of doctors and allied surgery staff, and patient needs are increasingly complex with an ageing population with multi-morbidity.

A good Pharmacist helps to take some of the pressure off a local surgery—offering advice about self-limiting conditions, and prescribing over the counter medications for presentations that do not need to be taken as ‘on the day’ appointments with a GP; patients who are on complex medications can receive education and advice from their pharmacist regarding their regime, including the importance of compliance, which can further reduce the burden elsewhere in the system; vulnerable patients, whether elderly or experiencing mental ill-health, have an extra professional keeping watch over them, and a pharmacist may be better placed than a GP—

it was a GP who wrote this—

to see a trend developing or a change that requires further attention.”

Tom Brake: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is aware from the conversations he has had with pharmacists that they often do things that are outside the terms of their contract. A couple of examples were cited to me. First, a pharmacist was involved in spotting someone who was having a cardiac arrest in their pharmacy, and then in helping someone else who had fallen outside the pharmacy and damaged their face quite severely. If we lost pharmacists and their extra input, that would have a significant impact on patients in a way that has really not been explained so far.

Derek Thomas: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. What I have learned from many patients and from the pharmacists themselves is that patients see pharmacists as the first port of call for health, so there is no doubt that there will be times when pharmacists are picking up things that otherwise would have to be picked up in A&E.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important not to confuse the role of pharmacists with the number of pharmacies? It is vital that we protect the pharmacists, who are very important in delivering in the national health service.

Derek Thomas: That is exactly right: it is pharmacists’ skills that we must be careful to maintain and develop.

I know that you have concerns about this matter as well, Mr Streeter, especially concerning the pharmacy in Modbury in your constituency, so I appreciate your support on this issue and the way you are chairing this wonderful Westminster Hall debate.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. The letter that he read out hits a lot of the points. Removing the funding will make waiting lists longer, when GPs are already under pressure; in fact, we are losing hundreds of GPs every year, as they go to other countries. Pharmacies can see people at the point in time that they would usually see GPs; sometimes people have to wait two or three weeks to get an appointment with the GP. So this proposed cut seems to defeat the purpose of the planned change.
Derek Thomas: I am pleased that we are so supportive of the community pharmacists, and hopefully we will get a good result from this debate.

I have three straightforward questions and a personal plea to put to the Minister, if you will bear with me, Mr Speaker—[Interruption. / Sorry, Mr Gary Streeter. / Laughter.]

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): It is okay, I will let you off.

Derek Thomas: Have the Government made any impact assessment in relation to their position of reducing community pharmacy numbers and the impact that this change might have on the health, and economic and social wellbeing of people living in our area? What assessment have the Government made of the impact that such a reduction would have on the workload of GPs, those in A&E and those providing out-of-hours services, if patients cannot access their regular pharmacy and then visit these other services?

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate on an important issue that could have far-reaching consequences, should the decision go through. Equally, I join him in urging the Minister to ensure that during the consultation—we understand that there is still to be consultation with patient groups—we will take, to echo a comment by a former Member, a constituency-by-constituency approach. I am sure that everybody will bring to the fore the particular characteristics of their own constituency. My constituency has the record number of octogenarians in the country and the fastest growing town in the south-east, and it routinely hosts tourism-driven events such as Airbourne, when 600,000 people come into the town. Pharmacies are a sometimes uncelebrated and unseen force that we rely on.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Derek Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and she is absolutely right to say that in a tourist area, where the population increases dramatically at times, we need to be careful that the core services are available for everyone who needs them.

My second question is: what assurances can the Minister give to independent community pharmacists? The third question is: what consultation has been conducted with pharmacy patients, and what would their concerns be if community pharmacies were to close?

My personal plea to the Minister is please not to write pharmacies off until they have been given the resources to realise their full potential in society. I feel excited about the potential opportunity that exists for the NHS through the proper use of community pharmacists. While reforms to NHS services are essential and the way that community pharmacists are utilised needs to be reviewed, a blanket removal of funds to pharmacies will only hinder progress and limit this opportunity.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. We have six colleagues trying to catch my eye and roughly 40 minutes. If they could show self-restraint and limit themselves to seven minutes each, that should see us through.

2.49 pm

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this debate.

I am the chair of the all-party group on pharmacy in Parliament and I have been for more than five years. I have a keen interest in public health and lifestyle issues, and I have quite enjoyed chairing the group. After the letter of 17 December, the all-party group—three Members of this House and one from the other place—met the Minister, on 13 January. We had what I described afterwards as “straightforward talking” about the letter—a letter that posed more questions about the future of pharmacy than it gave answers. The Minister was straightforward, and he said that one issue was that, in October of this year—so just for the second half of the financial year—£170 million will be taken out of the community pharmacy budget. That leaves a number of questions to be answered, including that of what will happen in a full financial year.

The Government make great claims about putting an extra £8 billion into the national health service, but the truth is that that £170 million, which is part of the £22 billion of efficiency savings, is being taken out of the NHS, so it is hardly new money. It is not the £8 billion—that comes in a few years’ time. We are talking here about major cuts to vital services.

Since the publication of that letter, it has become clear that as many as 3,000 community pharmacies could close in England alone—a quarter of them. How would that happen? Would it be by stealth, which is suggested in the letter and in the consultation currently coming out of the Department, or is there some sort of plan? We have seen in the letter, and in others, that if there is a 10-minute walk between pharmacies, that might be looked into, but there seems to be no plan whatsoever.

What we have to accept—I put this to this to the Minister in that meeting on 13 January—is that pharmacists do not work for the national health service, yet more than 90% of community pharmacies’ income comes from the NHS. The idea that we could change that mechanism and close community pharmacies is outrageous. The pharmacists may not work for the national health service, but their income depends massively on it—I wish it did not.

For many years I have been promoting lifestyle issues and the idea of pharmacists getting paid for doing things other than just turning scrips over, but that is how it works at the moment and there needs to be some serious talking. What happens if someone who has a 10-year lease on a property they took over to run the local pharmacy is forced out of business? All those questions remain unanswered, yet there is the threat of up to 3,000 pharmacies in England closing.

Rachael Maskell: I am following the argument that my right hon. Friend is putting forward. Does he agree that, instead of cutting services, we should be looking at opportunities for community pharmacies to extend healthcare further into their communities? It should be about investment at this time, particularly in prevention, which is all about saving money further down the line.

Kevin Barron: I agree with my hon. Friend. That is one of the reasons I took over as chair of the all-party
group more than five years ago. I believe that our pharmaceutical services should be taking that route of travel.

It would help if the Government provided details of how they will ensure access to pharmacy services in remote or deprived communities. If the market will drive closures, there will be chaos, and something substantial needs to be in place.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My right hon. Friend makes a powerful case. He mentioned the market. Does he agree that one difficulty that smaller independent pharmacies, such as John Davey in my constituency, have is that unlike the big chains they are unable to negotiate favourable deals on the drugs they dispense and, therefore, they are already at a disadvantage in market terms? Before the Government go any further with the programme they need to address that important issue.

Kevin Barron: I do not disagree with my right hon. Friend. I will not use the name of the company, but I can go into the store of one of the major chains, which is not in my constituency but not far away, and it takes me a minute to walk to the prescription counter, whereas in most of the pharmacies in my constituency I can get there in two or three seconds. We must recognise that, at constituency level, we are not comparing like with like.

Another thing is that key payments for pharmacies will be phased out, and there might be a drive towards a commoditised medicine supply service with an increased focus on warehouse dispensing and online services. Again, the possibility of added value in a local pharmacy regarding lifestyle issues potentially goes out of the window, and we really need to look at that. I have no direct experience, but I am told that they have that in the United States.

As well as dispensing medicines, community pharmacy teams help people to stay well and out of GP surgeries, to get the most benefit from their medicines and to manage their health conditions. The NHS spends £2 billion a year on GP consultations for conditions that pharmacy teams could treat. Community pharmacy can and should do more. A national community pharmacy minor ailments service could save the national health service some £1 billion a year. In some of the pharmacies in my constituency, there is already a minor ailments service. I understand that the Government recently changed their mind about developing such a service at a national level, and I would like to know why. Such a service makes great sense to me. It keeps pressure off not only GP surgeries but the local A&E.

In 2014-15, pharmacies delivered more than 3.17 million medicines use reviews, to increase people’s understanding and help them to take their medicines correctly. We get a lot more from our pharmacies than their just turning scrips over. Our communities and our constituencies need that, and if there are to be any changes, they should be carried out in a sensible and planned way, and not in the chaotic way of some of the suggestions of recent weeks.

2.56 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on introducing this important debate.

Some 28% of my constituents, across our 200 square miles of East Sussex, are over the age of 65. Losing our pharmacies would affect all my constituents, but I am particularly concerned about the impact on the elderly and vulnerable. I spoke today with a pharmacist in the village of Ticehurst in my constituency, who told me about his concerns. First, he is concerned that the Government might cut 6% from his dispensing fees. Secondly, he is concerned that they might withdraw the £2,500 that all pharmacists are paid annually. Thirdly, he is concerned that the Government might impose a clawback, meaning that if a budget is overspent, pharmacists might be required to reimburse their fees. Fourthly, he is concerned that the pharmacy will have to cover the welcome introduction of the national living wage and the cost of new pension arrangements.

I understand that it is essential for the NHS to make savings—£2 billion over this term—and it therefore seems reasonable to expect the £2.8 billion pharmacy budget to contribute to that. The Government rightly point out that many of our pharmacies are situated in walking distance clusters, but I am concerned that the proposed funding changes, if not sensibly targeted, could affect not just pharmacies in clusters but the rural pharmacy that is miles from another one and more than just a dispensing chemist. Because a pharmacist knows his or her customers, he or she is able to advise them on solutions more cost-effectively than if they were to utilise the wider NHS, including GPs and A&E.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): In an unscientific Twitter survey, which I kicked off at the beginning of the debate, 62% of respondents say they would prefer to see a community pharmacist first. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should be clear when making their funding allocation about the extent to which people would prefer to make use of community pharmacists before they see GPs?

Huw Merriman: Much as I prefer to disagree with everything that is said on Twitter, I could not disagree with that particular scientific survey.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument about rural pharmacies. A pharmacist in my constituency contacted me. He said that, if the proposed cuts go through, he will have to cut staff and the apprentices he is training, as well as reduce opening hours and stop the free services, such as the deliveries to housebound patients. The cuts would not just stop the important services that my constituents and many others get from rural pharmacies; it would also deeply impact on skills, and on skills going back into the services that we have to protect.

Huw Merriman: I very much agree with my hon. Friend’s point, and I can give another two reasons why pharmacists are so important. Like the post offices, our pharmacists also act as the eyes and ears for the welfare of certain vulnerable constituents. As a staple part of our village and town centres, pharmacies provide the footfall that allows our pubs, restaurants and shops to survive in an increasingly difficult environment.
I am not a deficit denier, and it would be hypocritical to be elected on the platform of balancing the Government books by 2020 and then to refuse to countenance savings in this area. It strikes me, however, that a better focus for efficiency is not the fees for dispensing, but the volume of drugs wasted by over-dispensing. For example, some drugs may be dispensed for a period of three months, only for the individual to change a course of treatment or stop treatment altogether. As soon as those drugs leave the pharmacy, they have to be used or destroyed. I wonder exactly how much money could be saved by dispensing for shorter periods of time.

Additionally, I find it extraordinary that pharmacists deliver NHS prescriptions free of charge to all who want that service. I understand why those who cannot collect their prescriptions should get them delivered, but to provide free delivery, effectively on the NHS, appears to me to be an area that is ripe for efficiency savings. I welcome the Government’s proposal for a pharmacy access scheme. That would provide more NHS funds to certain pharmacies based on factors such as location and the health needs of the population. To that end, I ask the Government to distinguish and to focus their efficiencies on those pharmacies that are within closer proximity to each other. If difficult choices are to be made, let us ensure that our constituents can still access a pharmacy within their locality.

3.1 pm

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve beneath your firm but benevolent eye, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on bringing this important, relevant and timely matter before us. It is similar to an Adjournment debate I secured in the previous Parliament, to which the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) responded, and to a question I put to the Minister the week before last on this very subject. In both cases, the response I received was one of warm words but few concrete proposals and little reassurance for the community pharmacies.

Like everyone else in this Chamber, I happen to believe that the Minister is a good and decent man, but I fear I can see the handcuffs of the Treasury holding him tight. I feel that he is beneath the terrifying thrall of the Treasury. The proposals are nothing to do with improving patient service. They are nothing other than a pathetic attempt to balance the books on the backs of one of the most productive, hard-working, positive and excellent groups of people in our society: the modern community pharmacist. Every day, they perform a miracle on the high street. They have changed from the old-fashioned world of the dispensing retail chemist to the modern world of preventive medicine. In fact, in many ways pharmacies are multi-speciality community providers. It will not have escaped your notice, Mr Streeter, that we have here Members representing the highlands and islands, the Isles of Scilly, the Isle of Wight, Southend-on-Sea, and Members from Armagh to Ealing. This issue is one that the whole nation is concerned about.

Mr **George Howarth**: I am sure it was an oversight by my hon. Friend that he did not include Knowsley in that long list. I hope that the high street pharmacies are not depending on miracles. I rather hope that they are dependent on science.

**Stephen Pound**: Not for the first time in my life, I have been corrected by my right hon. Friend. When I referred to a miracle on the high street, I was referring to the contrast between the traditional chemist that we have known in the past and the modern community pharmacist. To go into the modern community pharmacy is to see a treatment room or an interview room, to get a blood pressure test or travel advice or to get advice on smoking cessation, healthy eating or obesity. Those are all things that we would never have thought of before with a pharmacy. To my mind, that is miraculous, mostly because it has been organic and has not come about by Government diktat. As a great believer in state centralism, I find that quite shocking, but that is all the more reason for this area to be nurtured, supported and not threatened.

The point that greatly concerns me is that the proposals go against the grain of all current thinking—not just the Carter review and the “Five Year Forward View”, which is the NHS document that talks about an enhanced role for the community pharmacist—and against every single professional body. That is not just Pharmacy Voice and the royal colleges. Everyone seems to feel that the proposals are a retrogressive step that will not only make the situation worse, but that cannot be justified because pharmacies costs to overcrowded GPs, A&E departments and urgent care centres will ultimately end up costing us so much more.

This issue concerns me greatly. One cannot imagine a more different constituency from that of the hon. Member for St Ives than mine in west London. I represent a tightly knit urban community. People are close together and tightly packed, as opposed to the great rural beauty of the Isles of Scilly. We are, however, what is known as an under-doctored area, which is typical of the big cities. The typical GP in my constituency is a single-handed elderly practitioner, often operating out of a terraced house. That is changing, but as it is changing there is a period in which a great many of my constituents—many of them are transient constituents who are moving in and moving out, and cannot register with a GP nor wait two or three weeks to see a GP, and they queue up at the A&E department or the urgent care centre and cannot be treated—are asking, “Where can we go?” The answer is that they can go to a source of good, sound advice that is both responsive and preventive. They can go to a person who is qualified and skilled. In many cases in my part of the world, we have community pharmacies with two or three pharmacists who are experts in their area. We can even do minor injuries. There is no reason why we should not expand the community pharmacies.

There is much talk of the seven-day NHS, and the model exists before our eyes. The NHS can be a seven-day service in the community pharmacies and, I profoundly hope, everywhere else. The opening hours of the community pharmacies—they are sometimes found in hospitals and supermarkets—are a great model that we should be working to support. I know that the Minister’s heart is in the right place. I know that he wants to stand up and say, “I will resist the Treasury diktat and support the community pharmacists for the sake not just of all our constituents, but of future generations, too.” Community pharmacists deserve that, and they are certainly entitled to it.

3.7 pm

**Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under
your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I have been involved in the whole business of pharmacies since 10 to 15 years ago, when I worked commercially on the campaign for resale price maintenance. Members may remember that the then Government were seeking to get rid of resale price maintenance on many prescription medicines. So I have been following the area closely.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing the debate. Members should be aware that I am the Government’s pharmacy champion, as well as the vice-chairman of the all-party pharmacy group. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) is the chairman.

Just before Christmas, the Government announced that they wanted to review community pharmacies, and I very much welcomed that. The Government’s consultation process on community pharmacies needs to ensure that health service money is targeted better on where it can deliver the best results. The consultation process has highlighted that there is an oversupply or clustering of pharmacies in specific locations. The other day, I was driving back to London from my constituency, and I noticed that there were three or four pharmacies within two or three minutes’ walk of each other. To my mind, that has to be looked at.

The issue is how we ensure that the changes to the funding mechanism ensure the desired results, namely, the reduction of clusters while ensuring that we do not damage key parts of the pharmacy network. Using funding to make the changes is potentially a blunt instrument, and it will impact on smaller volume pharmacies in rural areas in particular. They are a part of the network that is desperately needed. What mechanisms are envisaged to achieve those goals? I understand that some large pharmacy groups might be willing to give up the leases on some of their shops, but they want to know whether the Government will give them an assurance that the leases will not be handed over to another chain of pharmacies. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Minister will explain what approach the Government will take to ensure that that does not happen.

Pharmacies, particularly community pharmacies, are undergoing unprecedented changes. They want to expand and to assist in meeting primary care demand, diverting activity from A&E to support more patients with self-care and in the prevention of ill health. Pharmacy is increasingly seen as a large part of the solution to the shortage of doctors and nurses in primary care. We are watching the spiralling demand for practices and community pharmacies, which are about delivering that patient care.

We need to support the innovation in roles to facilitate change in the infrastructure: information exchange, organisation, and working practices. Current investment in the innovation fund will probably not provide the level of investment needed, and access to transformation funds for this purpose seems unlikely. The change is needed to manage demand more effectively, but, unless supported, we place the system and the patients it serves at high risk. Can we therefore ensure that higher priority is given to ensuring that the changes are effectively supported?

Stephen Pound: On the subject of changes, and bearing in mind that the increase in prescribing is about 2.5% per annum, does the hon. Gentleman honestly believe that the Government’s proposal for a hub-and-spoke prescribing model, breaking the link between the patient and the pharmacist, represents value for money, or even sanity?

Oliver Colvile: There are two things. First, it is important that the consultation process reaches a conclusion. For us to try to premeditate on that would be unhelpful. Secondly, there are examples of where the Government have been able to make sure that money is better focused and better used. They can make budgets sweat quite well, and we should certainly take that into account.

I very much welcome the review, as I believe that community pharmacies should have a much wider role than simply dispensing prescriptions. They can take the pressure off hectic GP surgeries and our hard-pressed accident and emergency units. Such venues should provide alternative services such as help with mental health conditions, smoking cessation and suchlike. The Government need to ensure that pharmacies are the first point of contact when patients are looking for minor help, such as flu jabs. We also need to make sure that patients in our rural villages have access to pharmacies, although in urban conurbations, such as my Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport inner city constituency, there should not be a plethora of chemists just for the sake of having them. We need to make sure that patients’ safety is paramount when pharmacies are dispensing medicines.

Over the past five years I have consistently campaigned for the Government to decriminalise dispensing errors made by pharmacies. At present, GPs can only be struck off if they make a prescription error, whereas pharmacists can be sent to prison for exactly the same thing. We need a level playing field. Despite being the Government’s pharmacy champion, I am going to be slightly critical of the Government over this issue. We hoped that it would be sorted through secondary legislation before the general election. During a debate on the Access to Medical Treatments (Innovation) Bill, which was promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Devonport (Chris Heaton-Harris), I questioned the Department of Health’s decision to delay the necessary legislation until after the devolved Assembly elections and the new Executives and Governments had had a chance to introduce their own legislation. This means it is unlikely to be introduced before the summer, so English pharmacists are now dependent on legislation being passed for other pharmacists. So much for fair devolution. When my right hon. Friend the Minister sums up, will he explain why English pharmacies have to wait until the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Assemblies have passed the necessary legislation?

I understand that the Government are keen for pharmacies to be able to share summary care records to ensure that they are fully informed of patients’ medical history when giving medical advice. What progress is my right hon. Friend’s Department making?

Yesterday, I met the General Pharmaceutical Council, the pharmacy regulator since 2010. Various issues were raised by the GPC, especially the Pharmacy (Premises Standards, Information Obligations, etc.) Order 2016, which was in its Grand Committee stage in the House of Lords yesterday. I welcome this section 60 order, as it will bring much-needed transparency to the GPC’s reporting on inspections. There must be transparency. The section 60...
would also allow the GPC to take proportionate action when pharmacies fail to meet essential standards. This is just one of the reasons why I support the section 60 order.

Pharmacy has the potential to play a huge part in community healthcare in Britain. However, we need to address the fundamental flaws in the system so that our communities are better served by pharmacy and our healthcare system is used responsibly.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I note the time. Mr Streeter, and your stipulation about when Front-Bench speeches will start. I thank the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for initiating this important debate. As I look around the Chamber today, I see that Members from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are outnumbered, which is appropriate, given the letter that was sent and the cuts that pharmacists might endure. In Wales, the issue of health is almost entirely devolved, so much of what is being discussed today will be different in Wales from in England. However, the community pharmacy contractual framework is an England and Wales arrangement, so what happens in England could impact on Wales.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville) mentioned the issue of devolved Administrations and delays. Our understanding is that the consultation will conclude, the Minister will reflect, and an announcement will be made during the Assembly election campaign period. We will not have a health Minister in Wales if decisions made in Whitehall impact on the delivery of services in Wales. I think that it has something to do with the respect agenda and waiting for a health Minister to be in place.

Oliver Colville: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that if there were delays in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, the English pharmacies would end up waiting behind that queue?

Mr Williams: The hon. Gentleman should address that question to the Minister. The timing represents an unfortunate mismatch, for which pharmacists in England might pay the price. The timetable is of the Government’s making, not mine, so the Minister needs to reflect on that.

I want to talk about two facets of this debate that have been touched on by the hon. Member for St Ives and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman): the issue of rurality and the impact of the cuts. The consultation document stated:

“40% of pharmacies are in clusters of 3 or more meaning that two-fifths of pharmacies are within 10 minutes walk of 2 or more other pharmacies”.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is going to make an excellent point about rural pharmacies, but there is another element in my constituency, where I met my local pharmacist, Mike Maguire of Marton Pharmacy. Two of our minor injury units have closed and there is a proposal to close another walk-in centre, after the last one was closed. The collateral impact of the withdrawal of those services reduces the ability of the average patient and customer to access services. There is not only the rural aspect but the specific need at the time.

Mr Williams: The hon. Gentleman is right. That has been the message of many contributions. The work of our community pharmacies complements the work of the national health service. When the hon. Gentleman’s constituency is hit in the way that it has been, that represents the proverbial nail in the coffin of decent community-based services for his constituents.

On the urban point, to reiterate the point made by the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), we are talking about well-established community businesses that impact on many people in the locality. Two or three businesses clustered in the same area doing a generally good job will have an impact on the local economy, but the rural point is fundamental. We have heard about the pressures on GPs and the difficulties in getting appointments. In my vast rural constituency of Ceredigion, we have a district general hospital in Aberystwyth: Bronglais hospital. We have a good many GPs throughout the county. We also have a network of very effective pharmacists, and it is a jigsaw that works in providing good services. There are 716 community pharmacies in Wales—in high streets, villages and towns—with 50,000 people visiting those facilities every single day, proving the efficiency of the much-maligned Welsh national health service and bridging the real difficulty that people have in visiting the closest hospital or a GP for something as routine as blood pressure or cholesterol checks. It is really important that the outcome of the debate is that we support community pharmacies. That is fundamental.

In Wales we have developed our services. I visited the pioneering pharmacy of Mr Richard Evans in the town of Llandysul 11 years ago. He was clearly of the view that we could develop services much more, to relieve pressure on the national health service, and he achieved that. In Wales pharmacies have offered NHS flu jabs for at-risk groups for the fourth winter running. Almost 20,000 people in Wales benefited from that last winter. After four years of that provision in Wales, the NHS in England introduced the same service for the first time. Community pharmacies in Wales can treat about 30% of the common ailments that people would normally go to a GP for. That is a huge saving for the national health service. Pharmacies also promote meaningful public health campaigns. I visited the pharmacy in Borth, where there is a campaign on Parkinson’s disease. The staff are doing a good job talking with victims of Parkinson’s disease about their medication, and promoting awareness in the community.

Finally, having praised what is being done in Wales, in a rural area, I want to seek an assurance from the Minister that if his consultation has an effect on the three levels of services in the framework, there will be meaningful consultation with Assembly Ministers in Cardiff, and that any negotiations on changes to the contract will involve Welsh Government officials at the negotiating table. This is one of the small areas where health is not devolved, and that is particularly relevant on the Welsh border; it requires the respect agenda, and waiting for a health Minister to be in place.
3.21 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing the debate. It is somewhat of a rerun of the post offices debate mentioned earlier. Post offices provide a commercial service, but the key point is that they also provide a public service. My view is that the UK’s pharmacy network must be protected. They are vital because they are accessible and have good geographical coverage: 95% of the population can currently get to a pharmacy on foot within 20 minutes. For deprived populations, the elderly and young families whose car may be taken to work, such services that can be reached by walking are essential.

Local pharmacies provide advice and reassurance.

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Graham Jones: No, I will not; I am sorry, but there is not enough time.

Pharmacies are also vital because they are beginning to be part of a better national health service, providing a first point of contact: 1.8 million people visit a pharmacy each day. They are an essential part of the pyramid of care that has been mentioned. Accident and emergency departments are stretched, and the solutions that will bring about better healthcare must start further upstream, with pharmacies. A pharmacist wrote to me:

“Pharmacies need to evolve and we have always engaged with the governments in the past to deliver the targets, and greater use of pharmacies must be made to reduce the hospital attendances in the AE”.

There are 36,000 patient visits to my local walk-in centre, which is a fraction of the number of visits to GPs. Yet A&E, the walk-in centre and GPs are all stretched. Local pharmacies are vital for access and as part of a model of healthcare delivery in the UK that relieves some of the current pressures and dispenses advice that puts prevention rather than cure at the heart of healthcare.

My local pharmacy in Baxenden is part of an innovative model of care: the healthy living pharmacy framework is a tiered commissioning framework, aimed at achieving consistent delivery of a broad range of high-quality services through community pharmacies to meet local health needs, improving the health and wellbeing of the local population, and helping to reduce health inequalities. What that means in plain English is that those pharmacies are the first point at which healthcare and health advice is delivered. That includes workforce and workplace development—developing a skilled team who can proactively support and promote behaviour change and improve health and wellbeing. Work done by the healthy living pharmacy initiative has shown that 70% of people who visit pharmacies do not regularly access other healthcare services. Those pharmacies are well placed to support the health and wellbeing of people in the community by, as has been mentioned, providing improved choice, and access to early interventions on such issues as optimal use of medicines, obesity, alcohol and smoking. That should improve outcomes in the short and long term, and have an impact on the cost of care in the future.

The Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee evaluations of HLPs to date found that they “demonstrate an increase in successful smoking quits, extensive delivery of alcohol brief interventions and advice, emergency contraception, targeted seasonal flu vaccinations, common ailments, NHS Health Checks, healthy diet, physical activity, healthy weight and pharmaceutical care services.”

The report also indicates that the HLP model is working in areas with different demography and geography. I cannot vouch for the PSNC evaluations, but I welcome the actions taken by my local pharmacy to be available to local people and offer better health advice.

Across Lancashire, pharmacists such as Linda Bracewell at Baxenden pharmacy are keen to see HLP rolled out across Lancashire. That requires support from the Government and the NHS. All pharmacies, including HLPs, are a vital part of the healthier Lancashire agenda. Yet today pharmacies are under threat from two directions. Those threats are the reductions in Government support—the 6.1% cut by the Department of Health in community pharmacy funding, which comes to a total reduction in funding of £170 million—and market forces. I want to move on to consider that other threat.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) mentioned changes in the market, such as the growth of warehouse pharmacies that seek profit—this is the Amazon model—at the expense of both the public service element and geographical access points. That is a cause for concern. Not everyone is online, or, comfort with such remote arrangements. There is no guarantee that such a method of providing pharmacy services has a role in a healthy living environment, or a better healthcare delivery system. Will it engage with hard-to-reach communities?

Over Christmas I was shown a letter by Linda Bracewell that was sent to a constituent by Pharmacy4U, a mail order pharmacist. Worryingly, it was passed off as an official letter. People would feel obliged to fill it in and send it off. It was personalised, and, crucially, it redirected customers with repeat prescriptions to Pharmacy4U. Worse, Pharmacy4U is just one of several emerging online mail order warehouse companies—box shifters. It was not clear that the letter was not official but a marketing ploy. It is a matter of great concern that the letter was part of a mass mailing, sent specifically to people with existing prescriptions. Their GP practice was named on the letter as though it came from that practice. That is a worry for pharmacies.

How did Pharmacy4U get access to patient practice details? Is it right that the letter I saw was allowed to look like an official document and a request for detail, when in fact it was simply permission to transfer existing prescriptions—a huge business for local pharmacies—to a warehouse pharmacy? Even more worrying was the fact that all the patients of GP practices with electronic data systems had been mailed, while patients of GP practices without such electronic patient systems had not been mailed. Does Pharmacy4U have business connections to the data company that provides GPs with electronic patient data systems, and the patients of those practices? The Minister should be aware that those issues are serious, and that such sharp business practices and models threaten existing pharmacies. The presence of warehouse pharmacies operating on an Amazon model is of concern to me and, I am sure, our constituents, because it erodes the public service element of the current pharmacy network—particularly the healthy living pharmacies.
In conclusion, does the Minister recognise the public service element of pharmacies? Does he want to preserve the current pharmacy network? Does he see pharmacies as having an increasing role in healthcare delivery? Does he think that there will be more or fewer pharmacies after his review is implemented?

3.30 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. As this is a health debate, I hope you will not consider it inappropriate if I start by saying that my thoughts are very much with Pauline Cafferkey. Earlier today she was hospitalised in Glasgow for the third time after contracting the Ebola virus. She is being flown to London for treatment at the Royal Free hospital. I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing her the very best.

The debate has been extraordinarily good, so I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for this timely initiative on his part. I had a standard speech prepared, but such has been the debate that I would like instead to reflect on the contributions we have heard so far. Some might be wondering why a Scot representing a Scottish constituency is here at all. At least some people present have emailed me to say, “Even though this debate is not about Scotland, we would very much appreciate hearing a Scottish voice.” What I bring to the debate is shared concerns we have heard so far. Some might be wondering what we used to call in the old days the local chemist.

When making his compelling case, the hon. Member for St Ives said that patients see pharmacists as the first port of call. They do indeed. My own wife, Barbara, has a condition known as post-polio syndrome, which means that she has to take a wide variety of medicines that often vary. It is essential for her that she is able to go along and talk to a pharmacist as her condition varies over time. If she always had to burden a GP when she needed such advice, that would put an unnecessary strain on local GP services.

Rebecca Harris: A lot of people who go to community pharmacies in my constituency such as Bharat Patel’s and Asif’s go there with problems that they would not wish to burden their GP with, but that are a burden to themselves, so it is a great relief for them to be able to talk things through with someone. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that sometimes people go to a pharmacist because they would be uncomfortable or embarrassed to go to their local, perhaps single-handed, GP? They might want to ask for alcohol advice or about something that they find embarrassing, or perhaps a young girl might want to ask for emergency contraceptive but not wish to see the receptionist, who is her mother’s friend whom she has known all her life.

Roger Mullin: I agree entirely with the hon. Lady’s point. Moving on a little, the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) described very clearly the long-term funding consequences of the Government’s proposals. As he indicated, they are planning to insert £8 billion more into the NHS while at the same time seeking to cut £170 million from pharmacies. The use of market forces to cull pharmacies does not really make any sense. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) made a telling point that relates to the intervention that the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) just made: he said that pharmacists can act as the eyes and ears of vulnerable people in our communities. That is the other side of the coin to the point she made about people who feel under stress or strain in their immediate circumstances very often seeing the pharmacist as their first port of call.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), in his typical style, with quiet presentation, pointed out that the proposals will affect every community, whether up in the highlands and islands or down in Ealing North. Indeed, he said that they will affect every community in terms of both the science and the magic that is involved. Everybody here is, I think, as one in our desire to develop pharmacies, yet, as he pointed out, the Treasury is seeking to put on the shackles for the sake of a £170 million saving. As I have previously spoken in Treasury debates, I made a note to point out that that saving would amount to less than half of what the Government could save if they simply closed the so-called Mayfair loophole. Pharmacists provide a service far beyond that supplied by many financial advisers in our society.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) discussed the need to reduce clusters. When he was talking, I immediately thought of the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) pointed out, many have masters degrees in specialist areas. In all honesty, in some areas of medicine they can provide advice that the hon. Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) just made: he said that pharmacists can act as the eyes and ears of vulnerable people in our communities.

Finally, I was very taken by one of the statistics cited by the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), in

3.37 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this important debate. I join the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), in...
sending good wishes to Pauline Cafferkey, which I am sure we all wish to do. It is very disturbing to hear that she has become ill again.

In what has been a wide-ranging debate, we have had heard from Members about the importance of community pharmacies to their constituents. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) for not only giving us an impressive list of the additional services available from community pharmacies but, importantly, discussing the role that they can play in under-doctored areas, which is an issue in my constituency. We must of course consider rural areas, but urban areas can also be very short of services. In my constituency, we have lost walk-in centres and other forms of community support, such as active case-management pilots. It is a pity that such excellent services that keep people away from GPs and hospitals are being cut.

As we have heard again and again in the debate, community pharmacies provide an essential service in dispensing both medication and the essential information and advice that can prevent people from having to visit their GP for common health problems. On 17 December, their House rose for the Christmas recess, the Government announced a £170 million cut to community pharmacy services, with further cuts to follow. That initial 6% cut in the funding for community pharmacies will put significant financial pressure on many of them and will result in closures and job losses. Can the Minister assure us that the service offered to patients will not suffer due to the cuts? It is hard to see how there will not be a loss to patients. Will he comment on the additional pressures that will be placed back on the NHS as a result of that loss?

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) said, the Minister had a meeting with members of the all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy. I understand from the note of that meeting that he estimated that between 1,000 and 3,000 pharmacies, out of the overall total of 11,700, could close. He also recognised that smaller pharmacies are likely to be squeezed. Such a significant number of pharmacy closures will have a substantial impact on the way that the pharmacy sector operates. The sector called the cuts a “profoundly damaging move”, so it is important that the Minister updates us on the number of pharmacies at risk of closure. The Government failed to outline funding plans for subsequent years, raising concerns that there could be even deeper cuts later in this Parliament. Will the Minister tell us what further cuts are planned?

Despite the cuts, the Government say they want “greater use of community pharmacy and pharmacists in prevention of ill health; support for healthy living; support for self-care for minor ailments and long-term conditions; medication reviews in care homes; and as part of more integrated local care models.” As with everything else to do with care, a letter from the Department for Health suggests that the reforms can be carried out by integrating community pharmacies into a range of primary care settings. Integration is fine in itself, but it will not be achieved through funding such as the pharmacy integration fund, which is set at £20 million and will rise to £100 million by year five. I understand that the majority of the funding will focus on providing pharmacy services at GP practices, but that overlooks the wider role that community pharmacies play, which hon. Members have talked about in the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) passed me a note about the Windmill Pharmacy in his constituency. In a couple of hours on Saturday, its pharmacists dressed an elderly man’s superficial wound, gave advice on a fungal infection, advised on vaccines and malaria tablets for people travelling abroad, counted and sorted the tablets for many patients with multiple conditions, gave an antibiotic eye drop for a child with an infected eye, gave repeat blood pressure tablets to a patient whose GP was away, and, of course, had their technicians set up the dosette boxes for patients, including those with dementia, who rely on that service. All those services are freely provided in pharmacies. That is an excellent example from my hon. Friend’s constituency. How does the Minister expect community pharmacies to improve their services and continue to do all of those things when they face a significant decrease in funding and are simultaneously being asked to provide greater support to GP practices, care homes and accident and emergency units?

It has been suggested that we should facilitate hub-and-spoke arrangements, but there are real concerns about that system. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley said:

> “Warehouse dispensing, or ‘hub and spoke’, raises questions around safety, quality and access. The supply of prescription medicines cannot be treated like buying clothes and DVDs. High quality, safe dispensing depends on the opportunity for a face to face discussion between the pharmacist and the patient. I don’t see how that can be done in a warehouse.”

I share those worries, which were expressed very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), who asked some important questions about warehouse chemists’ practices and the data security implications of what they do. Most importantly, the Government must tell us how they will ensure that the essential face-to-face contact between pharmacists and patients is maintained.

Pharmacy Voice outlined the negative consequences of the cuts to community pharmacy services. It is concerned that the funding cuts will increase the risks to patient safety and will decrease patient access to medicines and vital support. The cuts risk job losses and will diminish community assets and the long-term potential of community pharmacies. Pharmacy Voice also warned that the cuts are likely to undermine existing health improvement plans and recent initiatives to integrate and develop community pharmacy services. We heard about some wonderful examples of integration and new ways of working in this debate, but all of that will be dashed.

Sue Sharpe, the chief executive of the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee, said that the plans “can only impair pharmacies’ contribution to keeping people well and out of GP and urgent care settings.”

The Government are, in her words, “proposing to drive ahead to radically change the market with a real paucity of knowledge essential for good decision making.”

We want decisions to be based on better information than we have heard about here.

In my constituency, I have been in contact with the chair of the Salford and Trafford local pharmaceutical committee, Varun Jairath, who is a board member of Community Pharmacy Greater Manchester. He believes that patient safety and welfare are at risk from the planned funding cuts, which means that the community
pharmacy network will have to reduce staffing levels and the services it offers for free, such as the home delivery of medication, which has been referred to again and again. I went with a delivery driver from a local pharmacy to hand out information to carers in homes who receive medication. Vital extra things such as that can be done, but only with the existing service levels.

The additional services provided by community pharmacies are at risk from the funding cuts. The minor ailments scheme, which was piloted in Eccles in my constituency, was shown to free up capacity and cash for other areas of primary care by allowing GPs to focus on the more complex patients. That service can continue at £3 per consultation only if community pharmacies continue to be funded at current levels. Such services, which improve quality and save cash, are under threat due to the proposed cuts.

As a number of right hon. and hon. Members said, one of the most worrying effects of the cuts is the potential reduction in rural pharmacy services. Access to pharmacy services should not be reduced for people who live in areas with widely dispersed populations. I ask the Minister—he has been asked this question already—what his assessment is of the impact that the funding cuts will have on rural pharmacies.

To reduce pressure on NHS services, the Government have repeatedly suggested that people should visit their local pharmacy for advice and the extra services we have talked about in the debate. Putting extra pressure on GPs through these funding cuts to community pharmacies is risky. GPs have warned that their workload is becoming unmanageable, which is likely to have an impact on patient safety. In a recent survey of about 3,000 GPs, 55% said that the quality of the service they provide has deteriorated in the past year, and 70% said they feel that their workload is unmanageable some or all of the time. I spoke to a local GP in my constituency recently in a practice whose list size had just been increased by 15%. The GPs at that practice cannot cope with that increase plus any extra that they gain from the losses that have been outlined in the debate.

We recognise the need to integrate pharmacy services better with the rest of primary care, but introducing cuts on this scale to community pharmacy services will not improve primary care outcomes. It will do the opposite. I fear that pharmacies will struggle to provide safe, good-quality services to patients. In proposing the cuts, the Government failed to recognise the value of community pharmacies and to put patients at the heart of their plans for pharmacy services. Patients will bear the brunt of these inappropriate cuts to an essential community service. A joint co-ordinated approach to planning and investment is needed across primary care to ensure that the pharmacy sector can play the important role it could fulfil, and, as I know from all the contacts I have had, wants to fulfil, and ensure that patients get the most out of both the NHS and pharmacies.

3.48 pm

The Minister for Community and Social Care (Alistair Burt): As others have said, it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. Thank you for chairing this debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall and giving colleagues the opportunity to make such a range of comments. They all have a good knowledge of things in their areas, and some have more specialised knowledge. We heard from the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile), the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) and, not least, the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin), in whose constituency I have spent many happy hours—my father was born in Auchterderran, so I know the area very well. Although the hon. Gentleman is from Scotland, his contribution was welcome, and he made some pertinent points.

Before I make some prepared remarks, I want to put some things on the record. I would be foolish if I did not understand the widespread interest in this debate. I would also be naive if I believed that this is the last time we will discuss this issue. Many questions were asked, so this will run for a while. Let me set out the background before I make my prepared remarks.

First, we are having this debate at a relatively early stage of the negotiations between the Government and the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee, which is handling matters on behalf of the pharmacy profession. Many of the questions and issues raised by colleagues on both sides are at the heart of those discussions. What sort of services will there be? Where is pharmacy going? How exactly will the reduction in finance be handled and distributed? Not all the answers are available at this stage because a proper negotiation process is being undertaken. Understandably, colleagues will look at the most adverse potential consequences to make a point when representing their constituents. I understand that, and the points have been perfectly fair. We are at that point in the process. We think we know what the worst may be, but we do not know the outcome or what changes there will be for the better.

Secondly, on finance, we are all realists here. We would love to work in a world where the status quo is not changed except for improvements, where the only issue with money is where more can be spent and where change, if there is to be any, takes forever to bring in. Life is not like that. The Government’s spending commitment for the national health service—an extra £10 billion a year by 2020—has to start being found early. It is not only about extra money, but about the efficiencies that the NHS chief executive identified, which are to be found across the board and could partly come from the pharmacy sector’s £2.8 billion of funding, which the Government propose to reduce. It may be an appropriate place. Again, we often approach such matters with the view that no possible reduction could ever improve services anywhere. That is not true, as we know from the experience of successive Governments.

The third bit of the background is where we are in relation to where pharmacy is going. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s November 2013 report, “Now or never: shaping pharmacy for the future”, states that the traditional model of community pharmacy needs to change due to “economic austerity...a crowded market of local pharmacies, increasing use of...automated technology to undertake dispensing, and the use of online and e-prescribing.”
[Alistair Burt]

The Nuffield Trust’s report, “Now more than ever: Why pharmacy needs to act”, states:

“Community pharmacy is subject to a particularly complex set of commissioning arrangements, which appear to support the status quo and inhibit innovation at scale.”

We would love to be in a situation where, as the hon. Member for Ealing North described, everything is absolutely great and every pharmacy offers all the services and delivers them marvellously, but that is not necessarily the case. Accordingly, change is sometimes inspired by necessity and can be for the better. That is part of the background to where we are.

Graham Jones: The Minister makes the point that, to pay for the £10 billion increase in NHS funding, funds are being shifted from other sources, including the £2.8 billion spent on pharmacies. However, the principle should not be to shift funding from primary care to secondary care. Our fundamental principle should be to shift—if we have to—money from secondary care to primary care, which is preventive and will cut costs in the long term.

Alistair Burt: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, and that is indeed being done in the NHS, but we are looking at where efficiencies can be made and at what different parts of the health sector can contribute. In doing so, we can see what changes are inspired in the service provided to patients.

To emphasise where we are with pharmacy, there are 11,674 pharmacies in England, which has risen from 9,758 in 2003—a 20% increase—while 99% of the population can get to a pharmacy within 20 minutes by car and 96% by walking or using public transport. The average pharmacy receives £220,000 a year in NHS funding. On clusters, which my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport mentioned, the Government contend that money can perhaps be saved in one place and used elsewhere for the delivery of new services. That is the reality of life. It would be great if new money was always coming from somewhere, but bearing in mind that the Government are dealing with an Opposition who could not commit to the extra £8 billion that the NHS was looking for, we have to make the changes that others were not prepared to make and still deliver services.

Let me move on to where we are going. Everyone in this room, Government Members included, recognises the quality of the best pharmacy services around the country. We are familiar with the valued role that community pharmacy plays in our lives and those of our constituents. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives for giving me the opportunity to put on public record the high esteem that we hold them in and to set out our plans for the future.

I am a firm believer that the community pharmacy sector already plays a vital role in the NHS. I have seen at first hand quite recently the fantastic work that some community pharmacies are doing across a wide range of health services that can be accessed without appointment. Many people rely on them to provide advice on the prevention of ill health, support for healthy living, support for self-care for minor ailments and long-term conditions, and medication reviews. There is also real potential for us to make far greater use of community pharmacy and pharmacists in England. For example, I am due to speak at an event tomorrow that is looking at the role that pharmacy can play in the commissioning of person-centred care for vulnerable groups.

Our vision is to bring pharmacy into the heart of the NHS. We want to see a high quality community pharmacy service that is properly integrated into primary care and public health in line with the “Five Year Forward View”. I cannot answer all the questions that the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) asked, but she did at least mention the integration fund for the first time in the debate.

Barbara Keeley: There is a difficulty, in that funding for integration should recognise that the extra work needs to be done. The point of today’s debate has been about the Government using blunt instruments, such as a 6% cut in funding, reducing the number of pharmacies in clusters, changing dispensing charges, and the warehouse pharmacy that my hon. Friend mentioned. It is the use of those blunt instruments, not the working with the sector, that is the fault.

Alistair Burt: That working with the sector is ongoing. That is what the negotiations with the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee are all about. I take the hon. Lady’s point, but those discussions are under way. We are consulting with a wide range of groups, not just the PSNC, including patients and patient bodies.

As part of what we are doing for the future of pharmacy, we want pharmacists and their teams to practise in a range of primary care settings to ensure better use of medicines and better patient outcomes and to contribute to delivering our goal of truly seven-day health and care services. As part of that, I want to work with NHS England to promote local commissioning of community pharmacy within the health community, so that we can ensure the best use of this valuable resource. That is why we are consulting on how best to introduce a pharmacy integration fund to help to transform the way pharmacists and community pharmacy will operate in the NHS of the future. By 2020-21, we will have invested £300 million in the fund.

While it is understandable that the focus of most colleagues’ comments today was access to existing services, little was said about where pharmacy might be going and what new opportunities there will be. That is part of the overall development that we are hoping to achieve, which will include the work not only of the access fund, but of the integration fund.

Colleagues asked several questions about access. I want to provide some reassurance. We recognise that some of the Government’s proposals have caused concern, and that will take some time to distil as the negotiations are worked through. We are committed to maintaining access to pharmacies and pharmacy services. We are consulting on the introduction of a pharmacy access scheme, which will provide more NHS funds to certain pharmacies compared with others, considering factors such as location and the health needs of the local population, both of which were raised today. Qualifying pharmacies will be required to make fewer efficiencies than the rest of the sector. We certainly recognise that rural pharmacies will need to be considered in that, and we want to ensure that location matters in areas of sparsity. That work is ongoing.
In conclusion, the process has some way to run. I simply put it to colleagues that, in relation to good community services on the high street, there is more for modern pharmacy to do. Looking at the proposals of the past, we hope that the profession shares the Government’s determination to move pharmacy into a new future, and I am convinced that the future will be good.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Derek Thomas has 40 seconds in which to respond coherently.

3.59 pm

Derek Thomas: Thank you, Mr Streeter, and I thank Members for their contributions, which have been really helpful. I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for seeking to tackle the many issues that have been raised. We all agree that the NHS is a fantastic institution. Community pharmacists hold some of the keys to improving patient care in the community and reducing pressure on GPs and other NHS services. I hope that the debate has gone some way to empower pharmacists to offer the solutions that the Government are seeking in order to secure a modern-day NHS, but this is all about the best care for patients, which we all agree is what really matters.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Will those who are not staying for the next debate please leave quickly and quietly? We now come to a very important subject to be addressed by the Member for the sunniest place in the United Kingdom, Caroline Ansell.

Military Training: Mental Health Resilience

4 pm

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered opportunities for mental health resilience in military training.

All of us in this place realise the debt we owe to our armed forces personnel and to their families for the sacrifices they make to keep us safe. It has to be acknowledged that unless we, too, have seen active service, faced danger and death, witnessed carnage and experienced loss we cannot fully appreciate or understand the impact and the price that some pay.

I had second-hand experience of such sacrifice when working in a boarding school. I was in loco parentis to 25 teenage girls whose fathers were serving in Bosnia. I saw something of the impact of protracted periods of lives lived apart and of relationships stretched. I saw something of the fear and anxiety of children for their father, and the loneliness and challenge for the parent left behind. Boarding school often provided the continuity that families need and, for the overwhelming majority, service life is one of purpose, identity and fulfilment, with men and women going on to lead successful lives thereafter. For the estimated one in five who bear the unseen scars, however, every opportunity to build resilience or mental toughness needs to be recognised.

The Ministry of Defence recognises mental illness, including post-traumatic stress disorder, as a serious disabling condition, but—importantly—as one that can be treated. My question today is, can it be prevented? In the US Battlemind programme, mental resilience training has been dubbed “armour for your mind”. Can we put mental health resilience on the same footing as physical fitness or, indeed, physical armour?

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): This is an important debate and I am sure that the hon. Lady agrees with the importance of having full implementation of the military covenant throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. I am sure she shares my frustration that in Northern Ireland we cannot achieve that. The points she is making are very important.

Caroline Ansell: I absolutely subscribe to the hon. Gentleman’s passionate support for the military covenant. I will say more about that later.

The new and growing recognition for mental health and veterans’ care on returning home is very welcome, and I pay tribute to the work of charities, of hon. and gallant and hon. Members and of the Government for their unswerving commitment to the military covenant. We are living amid a sea change in our understanding and recognition of mental health issues as we strive for parity of esteem between physical and mental health in our NHS. Times are changing.

Our commemorations of the centenary of the first world war remind us of a different time, when mental health issues bore a stigma and the social view was that wounds that could not be seen could not really be there. Veterans did not seek help and many could not even speak of their experience. Henry Allingham, God rest his soul, was an Eastbourne resident and a supercentenarian. He only started to share his story at the age of 105, but
between his 110th and 111th birthdays he is reported to have made more than 60 public appearances. I met him once.

“It’s good to talk”—the time-honoured role of the padre reflects that and initiatives such as the armed forces’ mental health first aid programme recognise it. After operational deployment, decompensation is another hugely valuable opportunity to safeguard resilience. Furthermore, the stress and resilience training centre within the Defence Academy at Shrivenham runs a course called “START Taking Control”. Perhaps the Minister will elaborate on whether such training, which was designed for postgraduate and leadership roles, might soon be extended to initial training.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on a subject that is incredibly important, in particular to someone who has a close relative serving in the armed forces. Alcohol misuse is one of the most frequently reported mental health problems for deployed UK troops. It is the only mental disorder to have increased in prevalence. Comparison of alcohol misuse in the same age and gender group shows that armed forces personnel are more likely to misuse alcohol than the rest of the population. Does she agree that the dangers of alcohol misuse must be incorporated into any training to improve the resilience of personnel?

Caroline Ansell: I acknowledge the great wisdom of what my hon. Friend says. It has been recognised for some time that alcohol abuse has too long been part of a work-hard, play-hard culture. Alcohol has also evidently been used to some extent to cope with the inevitable strains of conflict and combat. It is worth noting that young soldiers between the ages of 18 and 24 are three times more likely than their civilian counterparts to be consuming harmful levels of alcohol. The problem is a serious cultural issue that we must consider, in particular in connection with mental health.

Along with the many good things that the Government are doing to support mental health—I have touched on only some of those—I urge us not to overlook the most effective support system of all, which is the family. The UK Government implemented an operational mental health needs evaluation for those serving in the field during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite obvious operational difficulties in ensuring a full rate of participation, evaluation of a statistically significant 15% of all serving personnel in Iraq and 16% in Afghanistan greatly aided our understanding of the mental health challenges faced by our servicemen and women. The fact that 99% of those asked to participate did so suggests to me that the military has been successful in breaking down barriers to the point that armed forces personnel want to share their experiences, albeit anonymously.

The results of the survey, as broken down in The British Journal of Psychiatry, also showed the prevalence of the most common mental health disorders, with an incidence rate of about 20%. That, too, is significant. The results were used to match the correlations between family stress and the development of mental health disorders, further underlining how vital it is for us to support military families.

The past 15 years have been a time of strain for many armed forces personnel, given the extended interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. We know that the mental scars of conflict can emerge many years after people are relieved of active duty. Many trigger points can be completely unrelated events that take place in the home, far from the field of battle. Problems at home such as financial trouble, relationship breakdown or even child-related stress can all trigger mental health issues. It is therefore imperative that we equip our soldiers and, crucially, their families with all the mental resilience skills necessary to hurdle the challenges of military life and beyond. Family is the best support system, as soldiers themselves testify. How we promote and protect the military family will be defining for mental health outcomes.

Mental health is likely to be a ticking time bomb. According to Combat Stress, the veterans’ mental health charity, 13 years is the average length of time between service discharge and a veteran seeking help. Next month marks the 13th anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq, so the demand for mental health services for veterans is likely to increase in the short term. Combat Stress has already seen a 28% increase on 2013-14 in the number of veterans seeking assistance in 2014-15.

I am pleased that we are making it easier for our armed forces personnel to get the support that they need and to come forward in the first place, although a report this week suggests that a significant number of them—perhaps up to 40%—are still not seeking such support. Is there a case for more training, particularly in initial training? The received wisdom is still that prevention is better than cure. Do we need to offer more specific training and dedicate time to building mental resilience, just as we push physical speed, strength and stamina? Does that need to be universally rolled out and not hostage to self-awareness, self-selection or self-referral?

I am a patron to the Military Preparation College. As I shake those graduates’ hands and see them walking off into the sunset, I need to know that we are doing everything in our power to mitigate what is certain occupational hazard, looking overseas for best practice, looking at initial training and training at every stage of military service and beyond. We are looking to change culture by lifting up mental health awareness and we will need to have that as a focus for the foreseeable future.

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I remind the House of my interest as a serving member of the Army Reserve. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell) on securing the debate to discuss mental health resilience in military training.

The Government are committed to maintaining and improving the mental health of members of our armed forces. According to research, the armed forces generally show similar rates of common mental health disorders to the civilian population. Deployment on operations does not in itself appear to be a factor in mental health problems overall, although exposure to combat is associated with an increased risk of more serious conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder.
We are extremely grateful to our armed forces for the work that they do. It is our duty in return to provide care and treatment for them if they become ill. Evidence shows that most mental health disorders can be successfully treated and we have a range of trained medical personnel and facilities to do that, but it is clearly much better to provide our people with the knowledge, training and support that will enable them to build up both their physical and mental resilience before they deploy on operations.

It is important to look at health and wellbeing together, because overall they involve both the mind and the body. Mental wellbeing is very much enhanced by feelings of self-esteem and people having belief in their ability to do the things that they want to do. Good relationships—confidence in leaders and trust in friends and colleagues—are also vital. Good mental health does not mean never experiencing difficult feelings or situations, but it does mean having the strength and resilience to cope when things become difficult.

To that extent, building resilience is one of the principles that underlies all our training programmes, which are designed to be robust, challenging and realistic enough to prepare our people to carry out their operational roles effectively and efficiently, under inspirational and caring leadership. The Defence Academy is a world leader in the provision of military training. It has its own stress and resilience training centre, which is responsible for managing stress and resilience training and educational requirements within the armed forces. Its aim is to build psychological resilience in defence personnel and ensure that compatible training is delivered across the three services.

The stress and residence training centre has developed an all-inclusive stress and resilience training package called “START taking control”. Its purpose is to assist students in gaining the knowledge and practical skills to manage everyday experiences of mild to moderate stress and build psychological reliance to prepare them better to meet the physical, emotional and psychological challenges in defence.

In addition to the stresses encountered in everyday life, service personnel are often required to undertake extremely hazardous duties, which potentially expose them to traumatic and life-threatening situations, risking both physical and psychological damage. Psychological resilience is considered to be an essential component of military fitness. Personnel are taught how to spot potential indicators of a problem both in themselves and in their colleagues such as changed behaviour patterns, isolation and increased use of alcohol.

In particular, concerted efforts are being made to de-stigmatised the issues around mental health and to promote awareness of the professional care and support available. Stigma is one of the biggest obstacles facing those with a mental illness. It prevents many people from seeking help, which results in a worsening of the symptoms to a point where significant damage can be caused to their health, wellbeing and relationships. In many ways, the stigma associated with mental illness can be more disabiling than the condition itself. The Army has been running a major campaign called “Don’t bottle it up”, which aims to break down stigma and encourage personnel to seek help earlier as well as signposting the support and treatment available.

A specially designed project known as mental health first aid has been developed for the armed forces community, which provides the basis for increased mental health resilience among serving personnel and their families. It trains individuals to recognise the signs of problems and offer non-judgmental listening as well as offering help in accessing professional assistance. By making all personnel aware of the services available and by making clear to them that no stigma will be attached to them owing to their illness, we hope to encourage them to seek help as soon as they feel that they might have a problem. That will enable us to provide rapid diagnosis followed by appropriate and effective treatment.

One programme that has proved to be successful, both in the operational environment and back in the UK, is TRiM, which stands for trauma risk management. It is a method of peer-group assessment, mentoring and support for use in the aftermath of traumatic events. Trained TRiM practitioners are usually non-medical staff who are given the skills to enable them to identify those who might have been affected by traumatic events. That enables people’s comrades and leaders to provide them with appropriate support and refer them for specialist help if necessary. A key element of TRiM is that it aims to reduce the stigma associated with mental health problems and its roll-out across the services has certainly made people more aware of the importance of nurturing the mental wellbeing of those on deployment.

Personnel returning from operations normally go through a process known as decompression. Indeed, I experienced it on my return from Afghanistan. It consists of a short period—usually a couple of days—between leaving the operational theatre and return to the UK in which personnel can begin to unwind mentally and physically and talk to their colleagues and superiors about their experiences. That can give them an opportunity to discuss any issues of concern about their mental health and those of their colleagues, which can be followed up as appropriate. People are also provided with a stress brief, which aims to highlight normal reactions to traumatic events and give some strategies to help with readjustment. They are also given advice about risk-taking behaviours and the homecoming experience in general.

To sum up, the overall aim of those training, educational and support packages is to ensure that our personnel are ready both mentally and physically to carry out their duties, however potentially hazardous and traumatic they may be. Our personnel can be confident that any concerns will be treated seriously and sensitively and that a high quality of medical treatment will be provided if required.

My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of the family and the support we should offer service families so that they in turn can support service personnel. She may be aware that, over the next two years, we will allocate £4 million of covenant funding to support families in stress, which is a major step forward. Equally, she will be aware that, at the end of last year, we launched our family strategy, which is specifically designed to begin to address some of the concerns that families face, while they are spouses of serving personnel, in an effort to support them so that they in turn can support members of our armed forces.

I congratulate my hon. Friend again on securing the debate. We are proud of the work that we have done to date, but we are equally mindful that much more work
needs to be done in the future. I assure her and hon. Members across the House that this subject is at the forefront of my mind.

Question put and agreed to.

4.19 pm

Sitting suspended.

4.30 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Hollobone. I am glad to be able to bring this motion forward and to have secured the debate, but—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. Would the hon. Gentleman be kind enough to move the motion and then do his speech?

Alan Brown: Apologies. I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Motability car scheme.

I am glad to bring the motion before the House today, but in truth it would be much better if this topic did not require consideration at all. The origins of this stem back to the previous Parliament and the change from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment in April 2013. At the time, some of the changes were dressed up as fairness and giving people more control, but there is no doubt that there were concerns that DLA self-assessment, the automatic qualification process and, sometimes, the fact that there was no follow-up could possibly be abused.

That was the thought process that definitely drove the Tory ideology, and that has overshadowed how best to manage the system to help people with disabilities. Throw in a projected £2.5 billion saving and the fact that an estimated 600,000 fewer people would end up on PIP compared with DLA and we can see that this was just another assault on the disadvantaged. For me, the key change in assessing enhanced mobility was the reduction in the distance of the walking assessment from 50 metres down to 20 metres. Imagine it: somebody can go into an assessment centre and sit down and possibly be at risk of already meeting the walking test.

The enhanced rate is critical. The Motability scheme allows those receiving the highest rate of DLA or PIP to lease a suitable adapted vehicle, powered wheelchair or mobility scooter, in return for their weekly award. The Motability scheme is particularly important for enabling disabled people to be independent and to manage their condition. It allows users to participate in social activities and do the things that many of us take for granted, such as being able to continue to care for their children.

If we look back at the history, the Motability scheme was founded in 1977. It started out with a single car and has grown into a scheme that operates on a completely UK-wide basis, with nearly 650,000 users at present, which includes 15,000 using electric scooters and wheelchairs. It is a massively respected scheme, it is a charitable body and it has been praised by the National Audit Office for providing good value for money.

The Motability scheme plays a vital role for many disabled people across the country. Restricting access to Motability vehicles for those who have relied on them will undoubtedly increase the isolation that many disabled people feel.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this very important debate. As he develops his speech, will he reflect on the
particularly bad impact that the loss of Motability vehicles has had on people living in rural areas, to the extent that when constituents are waiting for an appeal to a tribunal decision, they cannot get to the meetings because there is no alternative transport? There is no public transport and they do not have a vehicle any more.

**Alan Brown:** That is a fine intervention, and I agree with the point the hon. Gentleman makes. I was not going to focus particularly on rural issues, but he is absolutely right. I live in a rural area and I know that, particularly in England and Wales, the cuts to public transport and dial-a-bus services have compounded the problem of people being unable to manage when they lose their Motability vehicle, so I agree wholeheartedly with that sentiment.

**Stuart Blair Donaldson** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. My constituent, Claire Ross, is 15 years old. She lives in a rural area and has a brain tumour, meaning that she becomes tired easily. Her Motability vehicle was used to take her to school and to hospital appointments. A recent reassessment removed the component from Claire and now the vehicle sits, unable to be used, at her parents’ house. Does my hon. Friend share my concern for Claire now that the Motability component has been taken away from her, and does he agree that it is shameful of the Government not to respond to my numerous representations on her behalf?

**Alan Brown:** I wholeheartedly agree, and I find it incredible that nobody has responded following my hon. Friend’s inquiries. I think most hon. Members here will have very similar examples from their constituencies, which highlights how unfair the measures are. I will come back to that, which is something the Government really need to take stock of. They should be working tirelessly to support the independence and inclusion of disabled people, using all means possible through Government channels.

An example of the concerns we have heard is highlighted in a briefing paper from Muscular Dystrophy UK. Trailblazers, which comes under the umbrella of that organisation, is a group of young disabled campaigners aiming to tackle the social issues affecting young disabled people, such as their access to higher education, employment, and social and leisure opportunities. These are young people who fully understand the difficulties they face in life. They are campaigning to raise awareness of this issue and to support others. They also know the possible consequences of the new PIP assessment.

One trailblazer commented:

“I suffer from muscular dystrophy and I am still able to walk, although it is difficult. I frequently push myself to live my life as much as I can, despite fatigue and anxiety that comes with it. I am absolutely terrified that one day, be it tomorrow or in a year, I will receive the letter that tells me I need to be reassessed for PIP. As someone who can stand and does not ‘look’ disabled at times, I believe I will have no chance of retaining my car.”

They added:

“If I don’t have my car, I simply would not go out.”

This is a young person who knows how independent they have become since being able to access a car through the Motability scheme. Imagine being aware of the life transformation that they went through and the absolute dread of being forced to return to the pre-car state.

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Thank you, hon. Friend. For giving way and for bringing this extremely important debate to the Chamber today. Does he agree that, given the impact on people’s mental health, including depression and anxiety—at some points, due to social exclusion—as well as the fact that people feel very isolated and the possible risk of suicide, we are at risk of creating an increased call on the NHS through co-morbid mental health problems, as well as physical disability in this case?

**Alan Brown:** I recognise my hon. Friend’s expertise and agree with her point, which touches on what I was saying. In some cases, it is not even about the stress of losing the Motability vehicle; it is about the stress and panic about getting to that stage, so we are talking about an ongoing mental condition.

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): On the point about increased cost, I would like to make the Chamber aware of my constituent, Lorna George. She lost her higher rate mobility component of DLA when she transferred to PIP and, as a result, lost her vehicle. Because she is in full-time employment, she was entitled to the Access to Work scheme, which meant that she received £150 a week from the public purse to get to and from work, as a result of losing her DLA mobility component of £54 a week. How is that saving anybody money?

**Alan Brown:** That was another fine intervention. These examples are what make it real for everybody, and I will touch on what I think is the madness of the financials later.

To be clear, we have heard some personal examples, but the statistics back up the concerns that I highlighted from the young person with muscular dystrophy. To date, of the 31,200 people on the Motability scheme via the higher rate DLA who have subsequently been reassessed for PIP, some 14,000 have lost the higher PIP mobility rate and, therefore, their car as well.

Going back to the stress and trauma of losing a car, we are lucky that Motability takes its duties seriously and goes above and beyond to support people in that position. It supports them with financial assistance—for example, through a transitional lump sum that might aid in the purchase of a car. Motability also provides advice packs for customers and advises on insurance, maintenance, adaptation services and even local transport options. We should be clear that Motability should not be filling in these gaps for people who are effectively left stranded.

It is no wonder that 91% of those who left the scheme were satisfied with the support that they had received from Motability. I commend the organisation, but that does not mask the fact that we are still only at the early stages of the PIP reassessment, with the reality that nearly one in two people lose their higher mobility access. I put this to the Minister: are we really to believe that almost half the people on enhanced DLA either exaggerated or fabricated their conditions to access Motability or, at best, suddenly no longer need that support?

In Scotland, 70,000 people are using the Motability scheme, so, using statistical analysis, we know that up to 31,500 people could lose out—I accept that some people...
beyond working age will not be reassessed. If we take that down to the level of my constituency, 1,500 people are using the Motability scheme at present, so up to 670 people are possibly at risk.

I will give the example of one of my constituents. Lynne Paton has written to me to say:

"I am due a new car in July. I haven’t been assessed for 2 years. I have the higher rate at present and I have"

had it

"since my 2 strokes. I have been in the hospital 3 times lately with chest infections. I am now struggling to get up and down my stairs because of the difficulties trying to get a breath. I am now using my electric Scooter again because I now can’t walk very far because of my breathing. The car we have just now was picked because the scooter can go in the car. I don’t know if I will get assessed again in the near future but if we were to lose the car I wouldn’t be able to get out and about. Also John is due to retire so our income will drop and we won’t be able to buy a new car suitable... I hope you can fight for people like me who need their cars. I know you will do your best for disabled people”.

That should be a clear case. If Lynne goes to be reassessed, there should not be a problem, but we all know that there are problems. She could go through a wee bout of better health and suddenly be deemed not to meet the requirements for the higher mobility rate. I should also say that I know Lynne as a fantastic community volunteer, who understandable has had to scale back recently, but with what she has put into the community over the years, there is no way she should have this worry hanging over her head. I dread having to go back to her and say, “You know what? I raised this in a debate at Westminster, but as usual the Government didn’t listen.”

I have already touched on the fact that this is not about giving disabled people greater flexibility and control over their budgets and lifestyle choices; it is part of the austerity agenda. The original suggested saving of £2.5 billion by 2018 confirms that, but it is also worth noting that the Government were willing to give assessment contracts worth some half a billion pounds to be able to get those savings. That is not value for money, and by the way, it can be no coincidence that the previous Minister for the disabled was one of the few Tories who lost their seat last year.

When it comes to the overall PIP strategy, the money has been so well spent and the strategy so well managed that the timescales have been a disaster, with the High Court ruling in June 2015 that the delays were unacceptable and unlawful. At the same time, the Office for Budget Responsibility noted that

“costings associated with structural changes to the welfare system...are subject to even greater uncertainty.”

It highlighted that its previous “Welfare trends report” had

"noted that our latest forecasts suggested higher than expected success rates for new claims to PIP across the forecast, which had in effect reduced the savings originally expected for this reform”

It is not achieving the savings that were anticipated and, worryingly, with 45% of people who have been reassessed losing access to the Motability scheme, we have to wonder what the real purpose of the original target was. Let us consider the irony of the Tories' manifesto pledge to halve the disability employment gap and support disabled people. Perhaps it is just me, but I simply cannot connect the dots. How does the Conservative party strip the freedom that a Motability vehicle brings to a disabled person from them and still aim to break down the barriers to work?

The Multiple Sclerosis Society, for example, has said that the Motability scheme can have positive impacts in terms of employment for users and their families. It claims that use of a Motability vehicle has enabled many of its members to gain employment, enabling disabled people to have a much more rounded, independent life. The recent Mencap review, “Halving The Gap?”, proved that the Tory policies are driving disabled people away from work rather than into work. That is why access to Motability vehicles is so important.

On a more positive note, the disability charity Scope undertook a report to assess the economic impact of getting more disabled people into employment, which was published in April 2015. It found that the impact on the economy of a rise in the disability employment rate would be significant. Indeed, a 10 percentage point rise would result in a £12 billion gain for the Exchequer by 2030. When we hear Tories in the main Chamber announcing that unemployment in their constituency is down by 50%, we should compare and contrast those statistics with the benefits of small increases in the employment rate for disabled adults. My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) has written to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to express concern that a lack of access to the Motability scheme will prevent disabled people from getting to work. It is clear that the Government should focus on that, rather than on savings.

Not content with one failure, the Government also have a proposal to cut the employment and support allowance work-related activity group payment, taking £30 of benefit a week from those in need and taking sick people even further away from getting back into work.

We in the Scottish National party are committed to supporting disabled people, which means opposing the regressive and punitive measures deployed by the Tories, not just for those eligible for DLA or PIP, but for the disabled people who rely on ESA and have been subjected to the unfair and failing work capability assessments. The SNP in Scotland are doing all we can, within the resources and powers that we have, to help disabled people, who are disproportionately affected by welfare reform. New powers over disability benefits in the Scotland Bill will provide opportunities to develop different policies for Scotland. In the Scottish Government, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners’ Rights, Alex Neil, wants policies that are “fairer and ensure people are treated with dignity and respect.”

We must remember that this comes against the backdrop of the UK trying to cut the Scottish budget through the fiscal framework agreement and the fact that, due to the Tory austerity agenda and ideological cuts, the Scottish Government are currently spending £104 million to mitigate the worst aspects of welfare reform.

It is my contention that the Government should think again. All of us here, as lawmakers, owe it to those we represent to protect the most disadvantaged. The SNP has already demonstrated our commitment in that regard and will do so again with new powers over disability benefits, but I repeat: urge the UK Government to think again.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate finishes at 5.30 pm. I will start to call the Front Benchers at eight minutes past 5, with five minutes for the SNP, five minutes for Labour, 10 minutes for the Minister and two minutes for Alan Brown to sum up at the end. There are six hon. Members standing. We have just less than 20 minutes. I am a bear of little brain, but I reckon that is three and a half minutes each, so I will impose that time limit, starting with Ben Howlett.

4.47 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing this debate on a subject that I care about a great deal. I should declare an interest, in that my mother has benefited from a Motability vehicle for more than 10 years.

I want to make it clear that I agree with the Government about ensuring that everyone who needs a Motability vehicle should have access to one. However, for decades, the system has not been reformed and it must be changed in a fair and cost-effective way if we are to ensure its future effectiveness. To ensure that the most vulnerable receive the support that they need, those who no longer have a medical condition need to be told that reform must occur to ensure the future viability of the system. That is only fair to people such as my mother who really depend on the Motability scheme.

Before I move on to my substantive points about improvements to data sharing between the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions and the NHS, I would like to seek assurances from my hon. Friend the Minister that the high volume of appeals that are currently being seen are constantly being reviewed. Although I understand that new systems take a while to embed, as we know from what happened when the previous Labour Government introduced the Atos system to handle work capability assessments, these things should be constantly reviewed.

Ever since I began to work alongside the NHS eight years ago, the UK has had a significant problem with data. Although I freely admit that it is not the most interesting subject in the world, it certainly is the most important when it comes to producing evidence-based policy. While I sadly do not have time to discuss the problems with evidence-based data collection and information governance, I want to focus for the last couple of minutes on the need for improved data sharing. All too often constituents come to my surgeries to talk about their difficulty in obtaining information connected to their medical conditions. Although I specifically ask for the Minister to work with his counterpart in the Department of Health to look into the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to understand why there is a problem with data sharing. Under that Act, the law allows personal data to be shared between those offering care directly to patients, but it protects patients’ confidentiality when data about them are used for other purposes. While I agree that these secondary uses of data are essential if we are to run a safe, efficient and equitable health service, we should consider new legislation that will further enable swift and effective data sharing between the NHS and the DWP.

4.51 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing this important debate.

I want to tell hon. Members about Lisa, who I recently met in my constituency. After a stroke left Lisa paralysed on one side of her body, she was thrown a lifeline and received a Motability car. For the past 10 years, the specialist car has helped keep her independent and active. After a decade of working hard to maintain her freedom despite the hand she was dealt and the severity of her condition, her car has been torn away from her by the Government. Why did the Government sever her vital lifeline? Because Lisa was two points short under the new disability benefit rules, which are seeing disability living allowance replaced by the personal independence payment. Although she was awarded the enhanced rate of the care component of PIP, she was awarded only the standard rate of the mobility component. When I visited her, Lisa had trouble even walking to the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

We have heard anecdotally in the media, as well as in this Chamber, about other vulnerable people denied the enhanced rate of the mobility component under PIP—those affected by spina bifida, those who have had a leg and communication, which can only be described as lacklustre at best. I completely back the Government in getting this sorted.

For too long, the most vulnerable have been let down. If there were a joined-up system, the GP could notify the DWP quite effectively if someone was no longer in need of a Motability vehicle. The efficiency savings that would be made could be driven into increasing support for those who desperately need it and would also help disabled people feel that the process is much more joined up when they probably need as smooth a process as possible to get through those tough experiences.

How can the Government achieve this? The Government have to identify weaknesses in the law that prevent data sharing between the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions. As the Government look to produce a Green Paper on the impact of welfare on health and wellbeing, it is important for the DWP to formalise discussions with the Department of Health and consider the benefits of direct and indirect data sharing. Although I appreciate the sensitivities around data protection, charities are screaming out for changes and we should be doing everything that we can to help facilitate that.

I specifically ask for the Minister to work with his counterpart in the Department of Health to look into the Health and Social Care Act 2012 to understand why there is a problem with data sharing. Under that Act, the law allows personal data to be shared between those offering care directly to patients, but it protects patients’ confidentiality when data about them are used for other purposes. While I agree that these secondary uses of data are essential if we are to run a safe, efficient and equitable health service, we should consider new legislation that will further enable swift and effective data sharing between the NHS and the DWP.
amputated and those who struggle to walk a few metres. Whether those cases are the exception or the rule, it is unacceptable. If such people are not qualifying, it has to be accepted that either there is a problem with the criteria for the enhanced rate of the mobility component or the assessments are not being carried out appropriately.

Lisa’s mother described how it took almost eight hours to fill in the 40-page benefit claim, only to be told that Lisa was two points short. Lisa told me that she does not feel physically able or safe to use the bus. Despite having a decent support network and people who care about her, she worries that now she will be trapped at home.

The Government keep telling us that it is possible to appeal if one disagrees with their assessment. Well, I would appreciate some information from the Minister about the proportion of those appeals that are successful. I fear that for those undergoing that process, the appeals will all too often seem to be little more than kangaroo courts. Furthermore, the length of the appeals process is such that too many disabled people are forced to return their vehicles before the outcome of their appeal.

The Minister has assured us that the appeals process “enables disputes to be addressed more quickly”—[Official Report, 2 November 2015; Vol. 601, c. 712]. However, in answer to a written question recently, he stated:

“The Department does not routinely collect information on the numbers of people who have had to return a Motability vehicle nor on whether they were successful on appeal.”

It appears that the Government really do not know about the impact of their policies, so let me tell them a little bit about what we know. In March last year, Motability told us that more than 100 disabled people every week are losing their Motability vehicles. We have now heard that, of those previously on the higher rate of DLA who have so far been reassessed for PIP, almost half—almost 14,000 people so far—have lost their car. Motability has estimated that if three out of every eight of their customers lose their eligibility for a Motability vehicle, the number forced to hand them back could reach 135,000. That estimate looks accurate, if not a little low. Figures show that 45% of those reassessed so far did not secure the enhanced rate of the mobility component under PIP.

It is fair to conclude that we are facing a hidden crisis. For Lisa and for all others across the country like her, I hope that the Minister will—to use a well-known, worn phrase—pause the policy and think again.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing the debate. I am here today to raise the issue of my constituent Cathy Walsh, though her case is representative of many others. She suffers from severe generalised dystonia, a condition that results in uncontrolled spasms, affecting her limbs and speech. She has been disabled since birth and has tremendous difficulty moving unaided. With a seriously disabling disability, she has been on disability living allowance for 23 years. On Friday 18 December, Ms Walsh was notified that her application for the advanced-rate mobility component of PIP had been turned down, and she was distraught—her car, which had been invaluable in allowing poor health. Even the Prime Minister has recognised that. What cost in terms of social justice? DWP figures suggest that the number who will lose out could be in the region of 428,000 people. Are we really to assume that all of those people do not really face challenges with their mobility?

Those currently in receipt of the higher rate mobility component of DLA face real and pressing challenges to their mobility every single day. Are these the people the Government wish to remove support from and on whose backs the Government wish to balance the books? We have all heard that those with disabilities must be given all the support they need to access the jobs market. I participated in a debate on that issue in this very room. How will removing the Motability vehicle scheme from those who rely upon it help people to access the jobs market more readily and easily?

Disabled members of our community who are able to work want to do so. Again, even the Prime Minister has recognised that. However, they must be supported into employment. Research has shown that a rise in the employment of disabled people would give significant economic benefit to the whole UK, but this is not just an economic argument and nor should it be. It is an argument, ultimately, about social justice. If we do not address the barriers to employment that exist for disabled people—and they do exist and are very real—we are simply turning our back on whole swathes of people in our communities, the contributions they can make, the skills they have, and the fulfilment that work can offer them.

Many disabled people already work and changing the criteria for the Motability scheme could actually lock disabled people currently in work out of the jobs market. Furthermore, it could slam the door of the jobs market in the face of those who currently qualify for the scheme and are actively looking for work. This cannot be the outcome the Government seek. Surely they must be alive to those dangers?

With PIP replacing DLA, eligibility will change, with the reduction of employment and support allowance by £30 a week for those in the work-related activity group. We now also have the widely discredited work capability assessments. There is a danger that this Government are rapidly showing themselves to be no friend of those who need support due to illness or disability. I urge the Minister to stand up for people who are disabled and to reflect not on how much money it will save the taxpayers, but on how much it will ultimately cost.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing the debate. I am here today to raise the issue of my constituent Cathy Walsh, though her case is representative of many others. She suffers from severe generalised dystonia, a condition that results in uncontrolled spasms, affecting her limbs and speech. She has been disabled since birth and has tremendous difficulty moving unaided. With a seriously disabling disability, she has been on disability living allowance for 23 years. On Friday 18 December, Ms Walsh was notified that her application for the advanced-rate mobility component of PIP had been turned down, and she was distraught—her car, which had been invaluable in allowing
her to lead an independent life, would be taken from her. That life-changing decision was based on one assessment conducted over an hour. It took the Atos consultant longer to write the report than it took to undertake the assessment. Ms Walsh’s neurological consultant has “strong reservations about the value of this assessment.”

I agree. Atos said that Ms Walsh was able to walk between 50 and 200 metres, but her consultant has “no idea how ATOS’ assessment could have been made, it is clearly incorrect… At best she can walk up to 20 metres and on a bad day significantly less.”

On those terms, it is obvious that Ms Walsh has a very strong case to qualify for the higher-rate mobility allowance. Instead, she has had to go down the extremely stressful route of a mandatory reconsideration and an appeal to a tribunal, which is making her condition worse. Her independence has been severely curtailed, at least until the tribunal decision is known, which could be months away.

Ms Walsh will have to rely on others even to help her cash the £2,000 transitional support cheque from Motability, as she cannot get to the bank on her own. That raises another issue: why cannot this money be transferred directly into her account? Even when the £2,000 has been deposited, Ms Walsh will be in a state of financial limbo. If she wins her appeal but decides to keep the money, she would not be able to return to the Motability scheme for six months.

Let us assume that Ms Walsh wins her case and wants to return to the scheme as quickly as possible, which she is keen to do. She would then have to return most of the £2,000. I do not disagree with that in principle. However, if the tribunal drags on for several months, Ms Walsh will inevitably need to use some, if not all, of the transitional payment to pay for other forms of assistance and transport. She would then be in debt while having to go through the process of reapplying for the scheme when her car should never have been taken from her in the first place. The Government say that what we have now is a “fairer assessment process.” Well, it does not feel fair to Ms Walsh. She is deeply distressed. I do not think it is fair; her friends do not think it is fair; and, more to the point, her consultant, who understands her condition as well as anyone, thinks it is very unfair. If her treatment is typical of the way in which thousands of other cases have been dealt with, the process has not been fair to them, either. The Government must be willing to conduct a thorough review of the process, which is not fit for purpose in its current state. I look forward to hearing how the Minister intends to resolve these issues.

5.2 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for securing this debate and for giving me the opportunity to have a quick “round the office” look at some of the anomalies affecting people as they transfer to PIP and its higher-rate mobility component.

I have already spoken about Ms George, who was in work and lost her higher-rate mobility payment only now to receive £150 a week from the Access to Work programme—tripling the amount of money paid to help her mobility, yet causing greater problems for her 13-year-old daughter, who is her main carer and now has to do even more tasks for her mother.

Looking at Ms George’s case for this debate allowed me to follow on to the case of Mr Abrahams, who is also in full-time employment. He suffers from spina
According to Motability’s 2014-15 annual report, 70,000 vehicles have already been taken away from them following reassessment. Almost 14,000 disabled people’s specialist cars have been removed, which has severely impacted their independence for disabled people and helped them to access health care and social activities. The Scottish National Party is extremely concerned that taking transport away from disabled people fundamentally fly in the face of the party’s pledge to halve disability unemployment, but their concerns are being ignored.

We know that we are facing these challenges because of the Tory obsession with reforming welfare. People are losing their Motability vehicles because the eligibility criteria in PIP assessments are different from the eligibility criteria for DLA, as many hon. Members have said. The Government should listen to those who have pointed out the consequences of the changes. For example, the MS Society has condemned them, stating that the Motability scheme plays a vital role for many people with multiple sclerosis. They conducted a survey of MS sufferers and found that the Motability scheme was particularly important to sufferers, enabling them to manage their condition and live more independently, which is something that we should all support. It also helps users participate in family and social activities.

Let us look at a typical case of someone who is being reassessed. Mrs C has been in receipt of DLA since 2014, after being hospitalised for five months, and she still has serious health problems. She got her Motability car in October 2014. As DLA is being phased out, she was asked to claim PIP instead. She did so, and received a decision letter dated 1 January 2016, which told her that her entitlement to DLA would end on 26 January. It also told her that, although she qualified for the daily living component at the enhanced rate, she scored only eight points for the mobility component, four less than the number required for the enhanced rate. Because her award does not include the enhanced rate mobility component, she will no longer be eligible for a Motability car. The letter told her that she had until 1 February to ask for a reconsideration of the decision.

She submitted a letter asking for reconsideration on 20 January, and on following up, she was told that it could take up to nine weeks—until 21 March—for a decision to be made. She had been told that she needed to return the car by 16 February; that is, nearly five weeks before she was likely to know the result of the reconsideration. Mrs C did not know how she was supposed to bridge that five-week gap and was unable to make any proper plans to meet her transport needs beyond 16 February. Should she buy a wee cheap car for just a few weeks? Did she need to find the money to replace her Motability car? Can the rules be changed so that Motability vehicles remain with the claimant pending their appeal? That would be the right thing for the Government to do.

The SNP in Scotland is doing all that we can to help disabled people, who are disproportionately affected by welfare reform. New powers over disability benefits in the Scotland Bill will provide opportunities to develop different policies for Scotland that are fairer and ensure that people are treated with the dignity and respect that are lacking from this Government.

Daisy Tadros was shifted from DLA to PIP without being informed. The first she knew of the transfer was when she got a letter from Motability saying that her car was going to be taken away. There had been no assessment of her case, yet there is a date for the removal of her car. We discovered that the Atos database does not work with the DWP database, so when Motability was trying to find out the status of Ms Tadros’ claim for PIP, the DWP could not tell Motability her status because the DWP does not have a system that works with Atos’s system. The only way the DWP, Motability and Atos could talk to one another was through the involvement of Ross in my office. He spoke to each of them so that they could co-ordinate and consult each other. The hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) spoke about swapping information and access to information, which is clearly a problem within the system. The Minister might find that lots of people who are entitled to PIP but who are not getting it because of administrative error will have their car taken away without their ever getting as far as Atos or a decision.

5.8 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) for securing this important debate. Time does not allow me to reflect on all the speeches, but I thank everyone who has spoken so passionately about the casework they have come across showing that people have been disadvantaged by the changes. I hope the Minister has listened and will respond to what has been said this afternoon.

Restricting access to mobility vehicles will increase the institutionalisation and isolation of disabled people, when we should be focusing on promoting their integration and inclusion in communities. The Scottish National party is extremely concerned that taking transport away from disabled people will make it extremely difficult for them to travel to and from work. The Government have pledged to halve disability unemployment, but their policies for disabled people fundamentally fly in the face of that aim. The Motability scheme provides independence for disabled people and helped them to live as normal a life as possible. As has been said, almost 14,000 disabled people’s specialist cars have already been taken away from them following reassessment. According to Motability’s 2014-15 annual report, 70,000 people in Scotland use the service. If the current level of loss continues, 31,500 people in Scotland will no longer be able to access this vital scheme, which should shame us all.

We know that we are facing these challenges because of the Tory obsession with reforming welfare. People are losing their Motability vehicles because the eligibility criteria in PIP assessments are different from the eligibility criteria for DLA, as many hon. Members have said. The Government should listen to those who have pointed out the consequences of the changes. For example, the MS Society has condemned them, stating that the Motability scheme plays a vital role for many people with multiple sclerosis. They conducted a survey of MS sufferers and found that the Motability scheme was particularly important to sufferers, enabling them to manage their condition and live more independently, which is something that we should all support. It also helps users participate in family and social activities.

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The SNP in Scotland is doing all that we can to help disabled people, who are disproportionately affected by welfare reform. New powers over disability benefits in the Scotland Bill will provide opportunities to develop different policies for Scotland that are fairer and ensure that people are treated with the dignity and respect that are lacking from this Government.

5.12 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) on securing this important debate, and I welcome to his place the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People. We have heard passionate speeches from many Members here about the devastating
impact of the changes to mobility criteria on the lives of many people who are already struggling with everyday tasks. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to this debate.

The purpose of Motability is to help those who would otherwise be unable to afford full mobility. As many hon. Members have outlined, the recent change from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment for people of working age has had various damaging effects on those with disabilities.

**Peter Dowd:** Is my hon. Friend aware of any action taken by the Government to ensure that the most vulnerable people with disabilities are protected from being isolated in their communities if they lose their eligibility for mobility service under the changes from DLA to PIP? I do not know of any, and neither do many disability organisations, including Muscular Dystrophy UK.

**Angela Rayner:** Many Members have also raised that concern. I hope that the Minister will respond to it when he sums up.

Many speakers in this debate have given examples involving their constituents and told us of the devastating impact on their needs and self-esteem. Significant numbers of people who currently benefit from the higher rate DLA mobility component will fail to qualify for the enhanced rate mobility component in PIP. That is a deliberate outcome; it is what the Government said up front that they wanted to do. They wanted to cut those benefits. It is not based on need; it is based on making cuts and financial savings.

Many people have had the adapted vehicles that are vital to their lives and livelihoods withdrawn as a result. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for raising the need for joined-up services, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who told us the story of Lisa’s experience and the impact of the cuts on her life. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke passionately about the responsibilities of society and community, and the cuts to the work-related activity group of employment and support allowance.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) spoke of her concerns about the quality of the PIP assessment and the conflict with medical experts who know the person’s needs. It is simply not fit for purpose. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corr Wilson) discussed Kayleigh’s experience and how only 50% of people get to keep the car after being assessed for PIP, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) discussed the devastating impact of the removal of the cars before an appeal has been heard.

The reality is that £24 billion in support will be removed from nearly 4 million disabled people by 2018. The policy will hinder disabled people, not help them. It is about removing support, not providing it, for people to live and work independently. The Extra Costs Commission has shown that disabled people face an average of £550 in extra living costs a month as a result of their disability, which is the main reason why disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-disabled people. PIP is meant to help with those extra costs. The Government’s determination to maintain such a flawed rule is a direct assault on independent living for many, and it greatly hinders opportunities for those with disabilities to contribute to society.

Any one of us is likely at some time to be affected by disability, either directly or in caring for a disabled friend or relative. I know; my son is registered disabled. I urge the Government to rethink this policy.

5.17 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown); he is clearly passionate about this important subject and gave a well thought-out and well-delivered speech. I also pay tribute to all the other Members who contributed, particularly those who raised concerns on behalf of their constituents, showing that they will always champion the people they represent.

I will pick up on a few of the questions raised before going into my speech, which will cover the rest of them. There are a few points that are slightly away from the subject of Motability. First, we are committed to halving the disability employment gap. We all welcome the fact that, in the last 12 months, 152,000 more disabled people were in work, and the number is 292,000 over the last two years. There is still a long way to go, but we are making considerable progress in that area.

Numerous speakers mentioned a 50-metre rule becoming a 20-metre rule. There never was a 50-metre rule. It is not that if someone can walk 20 metres and 1 cm, they get no benefit, but if they can walk only 19 metres, then they get the full benefit; it is about moving safely to an acceptable standard repeatedly and in a reasonable time period. The rule is a bit of an urban myth, and I wanted to flag that up.

**Alan Brown:** Will the Minister give way?

**Justin Tomlinson:** I will make some progress, and then we will see how much time is left.

On the wider issue of the money that we spend on disability support, we are increasing it year on year, all the way to 2020, compared with 2010. It is about £50 billion a year. We are also spending 14.6% more on supporting disabled people and people with long-term health conditions than those out of work for more than two years who are trying to find work.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) mentioned a specific case involving three Departments. I have never heard of that before, which suggests that it is an isolated case. We will talk further on that and try to get to the bottom of it. Also, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said that a decision was reversed on the back of a petition. That had no bearing on the reversal. I will discuss how the appeals process works later, but a petition would have no bearing on it. A decision is either right or it is wrong, and it will go through appeal. Individuals do not need to secure a petition. They may feel that it is an important part of their campaign, but it does not influence how things are done.

Motability is a fantastic scheme that was founded in 1977, following the introduction of mobility allowance in 1976. The scheme was founded by Lord Sterling, who
I have had the great pleasure of meeting on a number of occasions, and the late Lord Goodman, with cross-party support that still continues today. Before Motability, there was the invalid carriage, which was a small, blue, motorised trike. It had a poor safety record and was unable to carry passengers, so it was of no use for the most severely disabled, who needed carers to drive them, or for those with children. As well as being unsociable, it was—frankly—awful-looking.

Today the Motability scheme helps about 600,000 people and they can choose from 2,600 vehicles. It comes as a “worry-free” package, with insurance and repairs included, and its average cost is more than 40% less than that of the equivalent commercial lease. I have had the pleasure of handing the keys to a Motability vehicle to one of my constituents, so, like many Members who have spoken today, I have seen what a difference the scheme makes to people’s everyday lives.

Most Motability users qualify through enhanced-rate personal independence payment mobility or higher-rate disability living allowance. A small number of people qualify through the armed forces independence payment and the war pensioners’ mobility supplement schemes, which are run by the Ministry of Defence.

DLA was inconsistent, subjective and out of step with the needs of a 21st century welfare system. The reality was that more than 70% of people on DLA had received a lifetime award, yet the conditions of one in three people on DLA significantly changed every year. Because people were on lifetime awards, time and time again those people who might not have been on the highest rate and whose conditions had worsened were not being reassessed, and so were missing out on benefits. It is no surprise that under PIP the percentage of those people who qualify for the highest rate of benefit is about 22.5%, whereas under DLA the figure was only 16%. Therefore, it is wrong to try to convey the impression that DLA was the utopian benefit; there was widespread support for its reform.

There are still things that need to be done and those things are part of our ongoing work. PIP is designed to determine awards consistently and objectively, with most people having a face-to-face consultation with an independent health professional to help them to build their case. Members should remember that the assessors are not awarding benefit; that is done by us in the Department and we set the rules and the levels of benefit. The assessors are there to help people to build their cases. So, rather than being presented under DLA with a complex 50-page self-assessment form, which many people could not do justice to, PIP is there. I have sat through PIP assessments and I have seen how the assessors help to support people, particularly when individuals have a mental health condition or a learning disability and therefore need to be guided through the process, to ensure that their case is as strong as possible.

The Government are committed to delivering PIP in a safe and secure way. Full roll-out of PIP started in July in a controlled way, allowing us to test and improve the service before scaling it up. From October, and in line with previously published plans, we began the full national roll-out of PIP. I look at the statistics twice a week. We control PIP and it has been in a settled state for about nine months now, which is widely reflected among all the stakeholder groups that I engage with. That process and the claimant journey will continue to improve. We continue to work with stakeholder groups and claimants, looking at ways to improve communication and the process. Nevertheless, it is widely recognised that the process is now in a settled state. Claims are now taking an average of 11 weeks from start to finish, which is much quicker than we anticipated when we produced PIP. As of October 2015, 611,000 are receiving PIP and new applicants to Motability are now split 50:50 between PIP and DLA.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) talked about mental health. Unlike DLA, PIP considers the impact of someone’s condition on them and not just what condition they have, and it treats all impairment types equally. So, 21% of PIP claimants with a mental health condition get an enhanced rate of mobility, compared with just 10% of such DLA claimants, and 68% of PIP claimants with a mental health condition get enhanced-rate daily living, compared with just 22% of such DLA claimants. That is an example of how the improved assessment process is getting people to the right level of benefit—the level they should be receiving. We considered mental health at every stage of the design process, and that awareness has been built in to the activities that are examined.

A number of hon. Members have highlighted individual cases. Without all the evidence, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on a specific case. However, it is important to point something out. Many people have talked about a figure of 14,000 people; actually, there are now 24,000 more people using the Motability scheme than there were at the start of 2013, when we began introducing PIP. So, there are many, many more winners now, which is an important point to remember.

If people in individual cases, like those set out today, believe that an assessment is wrong, they have the option of a mandatory reconsideration, which looks at evidence afresh and allows for a late submission of evidence—

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I am just tight on time, but if I can give way, I will. If people are still unsatisfied, they can go to an independent appeal that is separate from our Department. Those who lose an appeal, which is a relatively small proportion of the total number of claimants, have had that opportunity to present their case.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) made a brilliant point when he said that in a utopian world, and former Governments have tried this, as a Department we would have all the relevant information at our fingertips. However, the “supercomputer” did not quite work, which is a shame as it could have helped hugely. A lot of the appeals that are won are not won because we made the wrong decision. We made the right decision on the evidence that was presented. However, when we send out the letter explaining why an applicant has not been unsuccessful and has not received what they believe they are entitled to, it sets out why. A lot of people then go, “Oh, actually, while I submitted my GPs’”—

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way on that point?
Justin Tomlinson: I will be tight for time, but I will do my best. Very quickly.

Ian Blackford: Given the fact that in many cases people are going through the appeal process, would it not be right for them to retain the ownership of their vehicle until the appeal process is finished, rather than losing the vehicle, particularly if they live in a rural area where losing a vehicle puts them at a massive disadvantage?

Justin Tomlinson: I understand that point, but it is a long-standing principle that benefits are not paid pending an appeal. A negative decision means that there is no entitlement to benefits, so we would not normally pay benefits unless the decision is overturned on appeal. That is true of all Governments for all time, which is a point that the hon. Gentleman himself has made. Again, with devolution there will be opportunities to do things differently. However, as it stands, that is how things are.

Generally, decisions are overturned on appeal because additional evidence is presented. We will continue to do all we can to make it as easy as possible for people to get hold of that information, because it makes a significant difference.

For those people who are no longer entitled to Motability, there is a transitional support package, and discussions conducted by staff in my Department before I became a Minister meant that the Department was able to secure a £175 million package for transitional support. That gives significant help to DLA claimants who leave the Motability scheme. They can keep their car for seven weeks; they are allowed to buy their own vehicle; and most of them will receive up to £2,000 in benefits, which is normally enough to buy a used car. Motability helps to pay to adapt new non-scheme cars and it provides advice on matters such as car insurance. That support is paid for by donations from Motability Operations, to make things as smooth as possible.

A number of Members have powerfully raised important points. We keep a very close eye on the Motability scheme, but the overriding factor is that PIP is being delivered in a controlled and measured manner, and we are making sure that we deliver it to the most vulnerable people in society. As I have said, we see a much higher number of applicants securing the highest rate of benefit under PIP compared with the number who secured it under DLA.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I call Alan Brown to sum up.

5.27 pm

Alan Brown: Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak again.

I started out by saying that it would be ideal if this debate did not need to happen. Unfortunately, it needs to happen and the convincing testimonies from all around Westminster Hall today show us that we have a long way to go.

There have been some excellent contributions. I thought that the Minister gave an excellent response, and was very genuine. However, his response still seemed to ignore the fact that the system is wrong; it is not working, and he must reflect on that. I believe that he is much more genuine than his predecessor was, but, as I say, the testimonies given here today prove that the system is not working.

The Minister also said there were more winners than losers. Again, when we consider the testimonies that we have heard, it does not feel like that at all. I go back to the 20 metres/50 metres argument. I accept that there is not an absolute rule, but I will quote the Library briefing paper on the Motability scheme:

“Under the final PIP Regulations, individuals who do not need a wheelchair only qualify for the enhanced rate mobility component if they can only move short distances of no more than 20 metres, rather than 50 metres as in the previous draft.”

I am reading that from the Library briefing paper. It is possible that the Library is wrong, but can the Minister confirm that? And if the 20-metre distance is not part of the guidance, even though there might be a repeat test, can he ensure that every assessment centre in this country knows that and does not use it to remove enhanced mobility from people?

I finish with those remarks and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. Question put and agreed to. Resolved.

That this House has considered the Motability car scheme.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 24 February 2016

[Biomass Energy]

9.30 am

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered biomass as a source of renewable energy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I am delighted to have secured this important and timely debate. I am also thrilled that, at this early hour, lots of colleagues from across parties and borders have come to participate.

It has been less than a year since the Conservative party secured a clear mandate from the British people to govern. One of the core commitments that we made in the run-up to the general election, which we repeat regularly, is that it is important to keep energy bills as low as possible for consumers and to promote competition in the energy market. Indeed, those same themes featured in the speech given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change to the Institute of Civil Engineers in November. It was referred to as the “reset” speech because it set out the Government’s direction of travel on energy policy over the coming years.

The two themes of affordability and competition are at the core of today’s debate. Like many of us, I am fully committed to ensuring that my constituents have an energy grid that is secure, reliable and affordable. The question, of course, is how we go about achieving that. Last week NERA, an independent economic research consultancy, and Imperial College London published a significant and insightful piece of research that considered the very issues we are discussing. The research was commissioned by Drax, which, as many Members will realise by now—if they do not, they have not been listening very hard for the past six years—operates a power station in my constituency. I grew up looking at the cooling towers. Drax power station generates between 8% and 14% of the UK’s electricity and, perhaps surprisingly, it is the UK’s single largest source of renewable energy thanks to its gradual conversion away from coal to sustainable biomass generation.

The report revealed that around £2 billion-worth of savings could be passed on to the consumer if the Government allowed biomass to compete in future renewable auctions. That £2 billion would equate to an average saving on each and every household bill throughout the land of between £73 and £84. That saving, which I believe any reasonable person—energy expert or otherwise—would argue is significant, stems from the fact that on a whole-system cost basis, biomass is without doubt the cheapest form of renewable energy available to us today. The concept of whole-system cost is important. It has attracted a lot of interest and discussion in recent months and, on that basis, merits further consideration today.

Much of current Government policy is skewed towards assessing the affordability of different technologies based on what is known as the levelised cost, a narrow metric that only captures the cost of an energy project from construction through its lifetime. However, as the NERA report highlights, a number of globalised costs sit outside the umbrella of levelised costs and are not currently captured by Government policy. I think I can fairly describe them as hidden costs. They are associated with more and more intermittent renewable technologies, such as wind and solar, coming on to the grid, and are ultimately passed on to our energy bills. For example, when the wind stops blowing and the sun stops shining, which it tends to do on these islands, the energy generated by wind and solar drops significantly. That forces the hand of National Grid, the system operator, to pay a back-up generator—usually gas—to switch on and generate power to fill the void. Clearly that action comes with an associated cost.

Because intermittent renewables are unreliable, they require much larger amounts of back-up than traditional coal or nuclear power stations, which have far greater control over how much electricity they generate and when. Again, that comes with an associated cost. The failure to capture those costs when evaluating the price tags of different renewables is doubly disadvantageous. On the one hand, intermittent technologies benefit by looking cheaper on paper than they really are; on the other hand, technologies that are more flexible and reliable and have higher real-world availability are handicapped by not being able to demonstrate the financial benefits and value they bring to the system. That is unquestionably the very definition of a perverse outcome.

If the associated costs, which are great, were added up properly and allocated proportionately to the technologies that generate them, the NERA-Imperial report shows that one renewable technology emerges as considerably more affordable than any other: biomass generation. I should say that I shall focus my comments largely on power generation. I understand that colleagues may wish to discuss the heat side of biomass, which is just as important, but if they will forgive me, I will confine my remarks to the generation side.

The report shows that if a renewable auction was held later this year and the Government allowed biomass to compete with other renewables on a level playing field, it could deliver a strike price that was between £8 and £13 per megawatt-hour cheaper than onshore wind, and £43 per megawatt-hour cheaper than offshore wind. Why is biomass so much cheaper than other technologies when the hidden system costs are taken into consideration? One of the principal reasons is that biomass energy is a flexible source of generation, which can ramp up or down the levels of electricity it produces at short notice in response to the demands of the energy grid. HAVING that flexibility in place, on the scale that a full power station provides, is hugely important. In fact, the more flexibility we have in the system in the coming decades, the lower will be the costs we incur as more and more intermittent renewables come on to the grid.

The Committee on Climate Change, an independent and well-respected voice on energy issues, stated in its recent report on the future of the UK power sector:

“Flexibility can help to meet the challenges of integrating low-carbon technologies. Flexibility can provide low-carbon sources of system reserve and response to minimise the need for part-loaded unabated gas plant, with associated emissions savings. Flexible systems also allow renewables and nuclear output to better match demand by shifting demand...supply...or both.”
In the UK, only one other technology can provide the same level and scale of flexibility as biomass, and that is gas generation. However, as its usage has demonstrated over recent years, biomass has a far lower carbon footprint than gas on a life-cycle basis. Furthermore, as many colleagues will be aware, because of low commodity prices the market conditions are currently sufficiently challenging that the economics of building new gas-fired power stations from scratch does not stack up. There has been a dearth of new plants coming forward.

That brings me to the second reason why biomass is so much cheaper on a whole-system costs basis. Unlike many of the options touted as the solutions to our energy future—such as new nuclear, new gas, new wind and new solar—biomass generation re-uses the infrastructure we already have in place by converting and upgrading power stations to use compressed wood pellets instead of coal. Some colleagues present are old enough to remember the Central Electricity Generating Board building coal power stations, which are scattered all around the country—or rather, at least some of them are left. I vividly remember Drax B being built; in fact, members of my family were involved in its construction. Using such assets, which the taxpayer has already paid for, negates the need to build expensive new transmission lines or spend money to make existing transmission infrastructure more resilient.

All that is particularly pertinent given the fact that we are going through a volatile period when coal power stations are closing across the country. Eggborough in my constituency announced its intention to consult on closure, and Ferrybridge, just across the border, is going. In recent months, Fiddlers Ferry and Rugeley announced their intention to close or, at best, to operate on a very limited basis. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) is here, as she represents Rugeley and is very concerned about the future of that plant and its workforce.

Such closures are terrible news for the communities in those areas and for the UK’s energy security. Since the beginning of this year, 2.5 GW of coal closures have been announced on top of the 4.9 GW announced last year, so a significant amount of power is coming off the grid. Those closures are creating genuine concerns about security of supply, and in recent months have forced National Grid to rely on expensive emergency measures to manage the grid and keep our lights on—the most recent event was in November. I am sure colleagues will be in equal measure surprised and concerned to hear that Drax is the last power station in the UK, and the only station between Yorkshire and Iceland, that can provide a black-start service, which is effectively a kick-start to the grid in the event of a blackout.

If the Government are committed to taking coal off the grid by 2025, as they have indicated, the quickest and most affordable way to do so is to enable more coal power stations to convert to biomass. That is not only the quickest and cheapest way to decarbonise our power sector, but a means of keeping existing stations on the grid, thereby ensuring that the communities that have enjoyed the social and economic benefits from those power stations for many years can continue to do so. There is a clear and compelling case, based on the analysis by NERA and Imperial College, for the Government to look hard at whole-system costs when considering which technologies to back or to allow to bid. I understand that the Department commissioned Frontier Economics to work on that topic, which is very welcome, and that the Minister committed to publishing the results of that report in the first half of this year. That is unquestionably a step in the right direction and I thank her for it, but will she assure hon. Members that her Department will utilise the body of research on whole-system costs to inform Government policy?

The Secretary of State said clearly in her reset speech in November that, “we also want intermittent generators to be responsible for the pressures they add to the system when the wind does not blow or the sun does not shine. Only when different technologies face their full costs can we achieve a more competitive market”—hear, hear. Does the Minister agree that this issue can be sensibly addressed through the policy options outlined in the NERA-Impperial report? It states that we should introduce either an administrative solution that handicaps renewable technologies in future contracts for difference auctions based on their systems cost, or a market-based solution that allows renewables to bid into the capacity market and CfD auctions, thereby exposing them to market prices that better reflect their true system costs.

Will the Minister allow biomass to compete in upcoming CfD auctions, either on a level playing field—which seems perfectly reasonable—or on the terms I just described? Alternatively, for the sake of simplicity and expediency, will she work with the existing CfD pot structure that she inherited from the coalition? The CfD auctions are designed around three pots: one for established technologies such as onshore wind, one for less-established, higher-risk technologies such as offshore wind, and one for biomass. Why do the Government not simply transfer a portion of the funding allocated to pot 2 to the dedicated biomass pot in this autumn’s CfD auction? The Department could do that very simply without any significant regulatory or legislative changes. It would complement, rather than undermine, the Government’s strategy for supporting offshore wind by producing the system benefits that I described, which would benefit all generators in the system. That solution would also mean that fewer power stations have to join what one industry analyst recently referred to as “the Strategic Balancing Reserve dole queue”—an absurd situation in which renewables are rewarded for forcing coal off the grid, while National Grid has to pay through the nose for an SBR contract to ensure that coal power stations remain available as a contingency option.

As I said earlier, up to £2.2 billion-worth of savings could be passed on to the consumer by allowing just 500 MW of further biomass conversion—effectively one unit. The greater flexibility that biomass provides to the system will make it cheaper to integrate other intermittent renewables, such as wind and solar, into the grid, if that is the Government’s strategy.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very important speech about biomass and the fact that it is the only dispatchable renewable. Will the Minister address the fact that the Government have removed all subsidies from biomass stations unless they are 100% biomass? Fiddlers Ferry on my patch was keen to combine coal and biomass in the same unit, but there
is no subsidy for that. Is there not a risk that the Government are making the perfect the enemy of the good?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a very sensible point. Many of the stations that generate from biomass—certainly Drax, two of whose units now generate solely from biomass—have used coal firing as a way of learning about the technology. That is a perfectly sensible thing for a power station to want to do. I, for one, would like to see support in that area, so that is a particularly good point.

Converting stations to biomass is the quickest, most affordable way to get coal off the system and achieve what the Department says it wants to achieve. In less than three years, Drax has become the largest decarbonisation project in Europe; previously, it was called the dirtiest power station in Europe. It generates 12% of our renewable energy. I am delighted that the company has managed to protect the 850 or so jobs that are currently based in the power station, although colleagues may have read a Telegraph article this week that appears to imply that half of the station is under threat. I hope the Minister and her Department noticed that, because such threats are not normally hollow.

The company re-skilled its employees in the use of that exciting new renewable fuel in the place of coal, and invested hundreds of millions of pounds in a supply chain that includes new import facilities, four of our ports and 200 new rail wagons, which I had the pleasure of launching at the National Railway Museum. Those rail wagons, which hon. Members will have seen adorning and adding to the beauty of the north and east Yorkshire countryside, were purchased from Britain’s last independent rail wagon manufacturer, WH Davis. It really does add value to the UK economy. The Chancellor often refers to the northern powerhouse. The UK biomass industry is unquestionably the power behind the northern powerhouse, and it will continue to power it for many years to come.

These issues are at the core of a number of concepts that I hold dear as a Conservative: competition, security and fairness. The clock is ticking, so the Government must take meaningful and decisive action. They have committed to holding three CfD auctions between now and 2020, the first of which is due at the end of the year. For the reasons I have outlined, if the Government allow biomass to compete in those auctions on a level playing field with other technologies, they could save taxpayers billions of pounds and make the UK energy grid more secure in the process. To continue with the status quo would be inconsistent with my party’s oft-repeated commitment to securing the country’s renewable future at the least cost to consumers. I urge the Minister and the Government to think carefully about this issue.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Four Members have indicated that they wish to speak. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at around 10.30 am, so if Members can keep their contributions to around 10 minutes, I would much appreciate it.

9.50 am

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I thank the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) for bringing forward this debate and for his continued work on biomass and renewable energy. I hope we can put cross-party pressure on the Government to do the right thing by the electorate of the United Kingdom.

It will be apparent to everyone present today that unabated climate change presents a major challenge to legislators in the UK and across the world. We must address the environmental health of our planet and the decarbonisation of our energy supply as priorities. Tackling the problem will require an unprecedented level of international co-operation. In some instances, our best course of action is to provide a positive example for other nations to follow, and I am proud of what Scotland has been able to achieve so far.

The Scottish Government are on track to meet their 42% emissions reduction target by 2020, and around half of Scotland’s current energy consumption is supplied by renewable wind power. We have also outperformed the UK on total emission reductions from a 1990 baseline in every year since 2010, and Sweden is the only European Union state to have outperformed Scotland. Professor Jim Skea, a member of the UK Government’s Committee on Climate Change, said:

“If you divide where Scotland is now, versus where it was in 1990, it is actually among the world leaders. That is unambiguous.”

The Scottish Government aim to have 100% of our electricity consumption generated from renewable sources by 2020. If we are to meet that ambitious target, biomass must play a key role in that transition. I welcome the Scottish Government’s strong commitment to this energy source.

Thanks in part to that support, over 2,000 jobs in Scotland are now based in the biomass sector, and Scottish Renewables believes that the industry has “massive potential for growth in the future.”

West Coast Woodfuels, a company located in my constituency of Inverclyde, is one such organisation, and it shows the potential for growth in the biomass sector. Founded by farmer Alastair McIntyre, it produces woodchip that is dried in specialised kilns and stored on site. The raw timber for the operation comes primarily from Scotland. Thanks in part to that support, over 2,000 jobs in Scotland are now based in the biomass sector, and Scottish Renewables believes that the industry has “massive potential for growth in the future.”

The economic benefits to our local economies should also be self-evident. Biomass plants create jobs in the construction, operation and maintenance of facilities. Employment opportunities are also created in the supply chain, not only through transportation but in growing and harvesting raw materials. The benefits extend beyond the biomass industry and into the wider renewables sector. A report issued by NERA and Imperial College London concluded that biomass is a reliable and flexible power source that provides firm capacity. Including biomass as part of the generation mix is likely to lower the costs associated with adding more wind and solar power to the system. This means that it can enable the integration of other intermittent renewable technologies (by providing back up generation),
and help to facilitate the phasing out of old coal-fired power stations, whose closure is putting pressure on security of supply.” If we are to continue enjoying the benefits of the biomass sector, adequate support must be forthcoming from the UK Government.

I share the concerns of those in the renewables sector that the decline in UK Government support not only prevents the industry from meeting its full potential, but damages investor confidence. Had the UK Government maintained their previous levels of support, the viability of many projects would not be in question. The cuts undermine Scotland’s renewables ambition, they are bad for our environment, and they are hurting businesses and consumers in my constituency.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there was widespread disappointment at the Government’s bringing forward of the closure date for the renewable heat incentive? It has caused problems for the poultry sector and major difficulties for many farmers, who will not be able to avail themselves of the scheme.

Ronnie Cowan: The hon. Gentleman has either read my mind or read my speech over my shoulder, because I was about to move on to the renewable heat incentive. I was particularly disappointed by the Chancellor’s announcement that spending on the RHI would be some £690 million less than previously forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility. The UK Government’s own reports have shown that the RHI has been an important tool in pushing forward the decarbonisation agenda. Data issued by the Department of Energy and Climate Change found that two thirds of users would not have installed renewable heat technology without the RHI. It is therefore difficult to understand why the UK Government feel it necessary to make these changes, which are being imposed against expert industry advice and to the detriment of jobs, investment and the environment.

I regret that we can only scratch the surface of this broad subject in the time available today. I would like to discuss a range of further issues given the opportunity, including how best to incentivise biomass use, address air quality concerns and ensure biomass producers are fairly treated through the tendering and procurement process. Most importantly, I want to see the UK Government abandon their policy of managed decline in support for renewables.

David Mowat: The hon. Gentleman has a list of things that the UK Government need to do to enable Scotland to meet its ambitious renewables targets, but, as of this morning, we have a fiscal framework. Is he aware that the Scottish Government intend to put money into such schemes? Presumably they can now do that.

Ronnie Cowan: I have not read the entirety of the fiscal framework at this point in time, but there are some issues that are reserved and will have to be handled through Westminster.

David Mowat: Maybe I am misinformed, but my understanding is that this is a reserved matter, but the Scottish Government will be free to invest in their own choices. If this was one of those choices, they could do so.

Ronnie Cowan: The Scottish Government will now have more powers to raise taxes and spend tax revenue as they feel fit for the benefit of the people of Scotland.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): My understanding of the devolution framework is that when something is within the competence of the UK Government, the Scottish Government are unable to invest in it. There are specific exemptions in the Scotland Bill for topping up benefits, but there is nothing about energy. We are talking in a purely hypothetical way about something that is impossible.

David Mowat rose—

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. It is not really in order to intervene on an intervention, unless Mr Cowan allows you to do so. Are you allowing Mr Mowat to intervene, Mr Cowan?

Ronnie Cowan: I was simply slow in getting back to my feet; I have absolutely no issue with the hon. Gentleman intervening. It is a topic of conversation, but when Scotland is independent, we will then take care of our own energy resources and will use them in a way that is most efficient for the people of Scotland. Until that time, there are certain issues that will remain reserved to Westminster and we will have limited power over what we can do about it.

Most importantly, I want the UK Government to abandon their policy of managed decline in support for renewables. Scotland is ambitious and we take the responsibility to tackle climate change seriously. It is time for the UK Government to do likewise.

10 am

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): It is an incredible pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) on securing the debate and on providing such a compelling argument for the benefits of biomass.

I will talk a little about coal-fired power stations and then about biomass conversion. Rugeley, in my constituency—and where I live—has been generating power since the 1960s; Rugeley A opened in 1961, taking coal from the local Lea Hall colliery, and Rugeley B was commissioned in 1970. Iconic power station cooling towers have therefore dominated our skyline for decades. In fact, I grew up looking at cooling towers, as my hon. Friend did, but along the Trent, and today I look out at them in Rugeley.

Rugeley A was decommissioned and demolished in the 1990s, leaving Rugeley B as the last remaining power station in the town; it continues to be coal-fired. Earlier this month, however, its owners, Engie, announced the probable closure of Rugeley B in the summer. That is incredibly disappointing news and a major blow to Rugeley and our community and, in particular, to the 150 employees, the contractors and the wider supply chain. Our immediate focus must be on support for all those affected at such a difficult time.

That news came only a week after the announcement of the scaling back of the coal-fired power station at Fiddlers Ferry in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat).
Furthermore, over the past few months, as my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty mentioned, about five of the small number of coal-fired power stations in the country have announced that they will close or partially close. The Government have already declared their intention to phase out coal-fired generation by 2025, but the closure or part-closure of those power stations demonstrates the real challenges that we face in the short term, let alone the medium term. The potential closure of Rugeley is a function of deteriorating market conditions in recent years, with a combination of a fall in power prices and an increase in carbon costs.

The Rugeley closure will see 150 employees and at least the same number, if not more, of contractors losing their jobs. There will also be a negative impact on the broader supply chain, not only for the Rugeley area in Staffordshire and the midlands, but going wider to include ports and the freight industry. The closure not only puts jobs at risk, but puts further pressure on energy security—simply keeping the lights on—because Rugeley B alone provides electricity for about 0.5 million homes. Consider that in the context of the other possible power station closures in the country.

I appreciate the desire to move towards renewable energy such as wind and solar, but it does not necessarily offer the same reliability or flexibility as other forms of energy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty said earlier, we are reliant on the wind blowing or the sun shining for those forms of renewable energy, but biomass, as a low-carbon renewable energy source, provides both reliability and flexibility. To date, however, the benefits of biomass unfortunately do not appear to have been fully recognised, although, as my hon. Friend outlined, biomass has huge benefits. Biomass, though, is not necessarily playing on a level playing field versus wind and solar, because the whole-system costs are not being considered.

The owners of Rugeley B investigated the conversion from coal to biomass fuel in 2012 but made the decision in 2013 not to pursue the option. Given the closure of coal-fired power stations throughout the country, I believe that there is a real need for the Government to revisit their biomass policy, and quickly. Such power stations provide the infrastructure for potential conversion to biomass, and their workforce have the specialist skills required to operate a power station.

Business rates are incurred up until the point at which a power station is demolished, so there is no incentive to retain the infrastructure—indeed, quite the opposite, because the incentive to demolish quickly is the key issue. Once the power stations are closed and demolished, that’s it, because the infrastructure that could otherwise be used to support alternatives such as biomass is gone. I therefore have a question for the Minister. At a time when market conditions seem to be accelerating the closure of coal-fired power stations, what are the Government doing to fully investigate biomass as a realistic alternative to other renewables, and to create policies to encourage and incentivise the conversion of those last remaining coal-fired power stations before they are gone forever?

10.6 am

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams)—
My constituency has been dubbed the energy island, a concept that I support, because we had early prototypes of onshore wind—they were much smaller than is proposed now. We have also had safe nuclear generation for 40 years, and we have projects in the pipeline for tidal power as well as the biomass project that I will talk about in my remaining time. It is a £1 billion project for not just a biomass station but an eco-park. Under the proposal we will have 299 MW produced from biomass and linked to that will be aquaculture, with a large fish farm and the opportunity to produce fertiliser at the farm for use in food production. It is a very forward-thinking project, so when we talk about building power stations in our areas, we should build eco-parks and link them into district heating systems in the future, so that there is no waste. Such areas really would be low carbon, with heat retained in them, which limits the effects of climate change.

The food part is important. There will also be research and development at the eco-park and it is important that we do the R and D in this country and do not just import that from other countries. We need to work at the forefront of new technologies, and biomass and eco-parks are one way forward.

The 299 MW plant—a very large plant—will be five 60 MW units in a module form that will be gasified on site. I understand that biomass sourcing is controversial. Orthios is working with DECC, which has already given consent for the project, which is under way—I was there at the launch of the site. In his opening remarks the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty talked about using existing infrastructure. The project is on the site of a former large Anglesey aluminium smelter, so it is an industrial site that is linked to a jetty that can bring in the biomass from abroad, but I am told that it will use locally sourced biomass from the UK as well. The biomass to be brought in will be managed waste from forests and other areas, which is less controversial than just cutting down trees and burning them. Biomass must be managed. I understand that the opponents of biomass feel that it causes deforestation, but there are ways of using waste materials that can be converted into biomass.

I realise that there is a time constraint, and that another hon. Member wants to speak, but there is the jobs aspect, which was touched on. New green energy jobs can be created if we go forward with biomass technology, many of which can be for retrained people as well as for apprentices. As I said, they can be in research and development. In the construction phase of the Orthios project in my constituency there will be 1,200 construction jobs and then 550 permanent jobs.

I was at the launch a couple of weeks ago with apprentices who have already been taken on, and with young people from the schools. We must say to the younger people that climate change is real—they get it even if many other generations do not—and there is a future for them in producing green, low-carbon energy. The United Kingdom can be world leaders, and Wales and my island of Anglesey in particular can pioneer many of the technologies.

I commend what the Scottish Government have done in wind because that project was not popular, but I would add that the renewables obligation allows the Scottish Government to top up renewables funding. They have done that as a way to entice companies in the first place.

Callum McCaig: That was allowed under the previous regime, but the power over the renewables obligation was brought back to Westminster and the scheme has been closed prematurely despite an explicit promise. While that was a sensible way of dealing with things that allowed for different development, unfortunately that opportunity is now closed.

Albert Owen: I was involved in some of the Government talks when the renewables obligation was set up and it did have that flexibility, so it is a shame if that has been taken away, because the devolved Administrations could pioneer their own sources and technologies. They and the UK could work together to make the UK a world leader in technology. I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point, but the flexibility was there. I am glad for the correction.

We need to have low-carbon energy going forward and biomass is a huge part of that. I say to the Minister that the auctions are a complicated process. I sat on an Energy Bill Committee in the previous Parliament in which many of us—including the Ministers, who are no longer Ministers in that Department—found them confusing and complicated. We need to simplify them, because if we do not we could lose out on innovative schemes and that worries me. As the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty said, we need a level playing field for biomass, or indeed a special category for it so that we can develop the technology to play a part in the mix going forward. We need a truly consensual approach to our energy policies, with them not determined by five-year electoral cycles. They need to be in the long-term interest and work towards climate change.

I was at the COP 21, where there was a mixed reaction to Britain. Yes, the Secretary of State was trumpeting the fact that we are closing down our coal stations, but there was also real concern about the cuts to our renewables. What I want to see is real investment in low-carbon energy going forward. I repeat that that should be in new nuclear, in renewables and in energy efficiency measures so that, on climate change, the United Kingdom can hold its head up proudly and say, “We are world leaders.” I want to see biomass as part of that and I hope that when the Minister responds she will give special consideration to biomass, because the project I have outlined in my constituency and what we have heard from other hon. Members is good for Britain and good for climate change.

10.16 am

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. In contrast to the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), I will focus more on combined heat and power, which he mentioned earlier. I thank him for bringing the debate on this critical issue to the House. I am glad to see it getting the attention that it so richly deserves.

The Scottish National party is highly supportive of the increasing role that biomass heat and combined heat and power schemes are playing in reducing CO2 emissions. Biomass has played a vital part in putting Scotland on track to meet its 42% emissions reduction
Biomass is the only other naturally occurring, energy-containing carbon resource known that is large enough to be used as a substitute for fossil fuels. Unlike fossil fuels, biomass is renewable, in the sense that only a short period of time is required to replace what is used as an energy resource. Biomass is also held to be carbon neutral, in that the amount of carbon absorbed in growing it is equivalent to the amount produced when burned for energy. The intermittency of solar and wind and the role that biomass can play in our overall energy solution have been well commented on, so I will not take them further than that.

The Scottish Government have shown a strong political commitment to biomass as a renewable energy resource. The UK’s largest biomass combined heat and power plant in Markinch, in the kingdom of Fife, received significant funding from the Scottish Government. The plant not only is an asset to Scotland but will help deliver the target of 11% of non-electrical heat demand by renewable sources by 2020, yet the UK Government’s decisions continue to undermine the UK’s and Scotland’s renewables commitments—more on that later.

The Association for Decentralised Energy has provided information on CHP, CIDs and the RHI, which are issues that have been touched on by speakers today. Combined heat and power can use renewable and non-renewable fuels. No matter the fuel, CHP represents the optimal use of that fuel, reducing fuel use by 10% to 30%. Biomass CHP plants are most commonly used in industrial processes where their energy efficiency helps the user to improve competitiveness and reduce carbon emissions. However, biomass CHP is suffering a significant investment hiatus, because of a lack of policy certainty with respect to both the contract for difference and the renewable heat incentive. Only 20 MWe of the potential 440 MWe in biomass CHP projects have reached financial close. Most others are on hold or cancelled, or have been converted to power-only sites.

Under the contract for difference, new build biomass projects must be CHP, as the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty mentioned. However, the industry currently views biomass CHP as largely uninvestable—if that is a word—under the contract for difference, because the CFD scheme’s design is not fit for purpose. The CFD biomass CHP tariff will need to be changed before we can expect the biomass CHP opportunity to be captured. To make the CFD investable for biomass CHP, the Government must allow biomass CHP to receive CFD for its electricity over the full 15 years of the contract, even if its heat customer closes. The Department for Energy and Climate Change has been considering that necessary change for close to two years, and there is now a risk that the regulations that are needed will not be in place before the next CFD allocation round, which is expected late in 2016. We might contrast that with the Hinkley C nuclear strike price of double the current rate, guaranteed for 35 years.

**Albert Owen:** I am not trying to trip up the hon. Gentleman against his party, but does he welcome the extension of nuclear plants? We have safe generation there that will produce low-carbon energy for up to an extra five years.

**Philip Boswell:** As the hon. Gentleman well knows, we have two ageing nuclear power stations in Scotland, and while they have played their part, we do not see nuclear as what we require to advance in the long-term future in Scotland. In fact, we do not need it. It is a choice that England has made and that it unfortunately seems to be forcing on us.

**Albert Owen:** And Wales.

**Philip Boswell:** And Wales—I concede that point.

The debate pack provided by the House of Commons Library states:

“Following its commitment to increase funding for the RHI to £1.15 billion in 2021, the Government published a series of RHI review documents in February 2016, in advance of an expected review of the scheme in 2017. The Government concluded that ‘the RHI had been wholly positive in its influence on the renewable heat technology market’.

Many, including myself, would disagree with that statement.

While the industry welcomes the decision to extend funding for the renewable heat incentive up to 2020, reforms are needed to increase certainty within the scheme if it is to be successful in delivering large-scale renewable heat projects. Investors do not know the RHI’s value when they plan and then make an investment decision, as happens under other large-scale renewable electricity mechanisms, such as the renewables obligation, which has been much covered in other debates. The Association for Decentralised Energy therefore recommends that DECC should implement a tariff guarantee under the RHI to bring forward lower-cost, large-scale renewable heat such as biomass CHP. With tariff guarantees, the Government would allow a developer to lock in their RHI tariff when the project reached financial close. I agree entirely with the ADE about that.

The House will doubtless note that the only constant with UK Government energy legislation is change—moving the legislative goalsposts and destroying investor confidence via uncertainty. I suppose they are at least consistent about moving the goalsposts, with more than 18 changes in oil and gas legislation in 15 years, the removal of the renewables obligation removal one year early for onshore wind, withdrawal of the £1 billion fund for carbon capture, solar energy subsidy cuts and the scrapping of large-scale solar energy projects, and plans to privatise the green investment bank just as it is flourishing. Those renewables cuts are made because of the UK Government’s focus on the “rash dash for gas”, or fracking, and their prioritisation of nuclear energy, which shows the true direction of their energy policy.

The hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty spoke of a black start capability constraint, and that is made all the more pertinent by the closure of Longannet next month. I put the blame for that squarely with the Government, because of their prejudiced transmission charge regime.

The hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty and my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde touched on the reuse of existing energy infrastructure. The SNP believes that the UK Government should be more flexible about legislation, to make a smoother transition to renewable energy from fossil fuels, if possible. I maintain that biomass has a key role to play, and I urge increased use of it, especially given DECC’s own figures for electricity generated by renewables and as a percentage of gross
consumption, which show a meagre increase of biofuel as a percentage of overall renewable energy, from around 4.1% in 2009 to 4.7% in 2013. However, in line with the Government’s advice, I would introduce a word of caution, because that industry often competes with other types of land use such as food and raw materials production, and of course with the vagaries of crop prices we should also be careful about the availability and price of sufficient sustainably resourced biomass.

**Albert Owen:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which is why waste areas are relevant. Many parts of the world have shrub overgrowth. That can be used and the land can return to agricultural use, helping less developed countries.

**Philip Boswell:** That is certainly an option that any sensible leader would consider when thinking about future policy. I agree that it is vital to retain a sensible balance.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned how critical research and development is to the development of the industry. I understand that the Government are doing something about that. Indeed, the UK Government set out policies to support the use of biomass in energy generation in their UK biomass strategy published in 2012, which noted:

“It is widely recognised that bioenergy has an important role to play if the UK is to meet its low carbon objectives by 2050. Excluding biomass from the energy mix would significantly increase the cost of decarbonising our energy system—an increase estimated by recent analysis at £44 billion. As set out in the 2011 UK Renewable Energy Roadmap, bioenergy is also an important part of the Government’s plans to meet the Renewable Energy Directive objectives in 2020.”

Nevertheless, biomass, like all other proven renewable energy sources, is being neglected for the UK Government’s preferred options of nuclear and unconventional gas, which of course means we will not meet our climate change targets as set out in the Climate Change Act 2008.

**David Mowat:** The hon. Gentleman and his colleague, the hon. Member for Inverclyde, both made the point that Scotland has outperformed many parts of Europe—everyone except Sweden, I think we heard—with its decarbonisation initiatives, yet we also hear that that is a reserved matter, so such policy is for the UK Government. I am interested to understand how in that case the credit for doing so well is due to the Scottish Government, not the UK Government. I would point out, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) did, that, of all the devolved Administrations and England, Scotland has the highest percentage of electricity generated from nuclear. It is a long road to replace that.

**Mr David Crausby (in the Chair):** Order. That is a long intervention.

**Philip Boswell:** I concede that the hon. Gentleman is perfectly right—energy is more widely reserved. We in Scotland are keen to play our part in the UK as part of an overall national solution for energy. Our choices may be different, and our choices and powers are constrained. In fact, during the debate on the Energy Bill, the Government rejected our calls for CfD devolution, which is the most popular mechanism we would have for making inroads.

As I mentioned, we will not meet our targets under the Climate Change Act 2008, so I urge the Minister to revise legislation to enable biomass to play its part in achieving our renewable energy targets on time.

10.29 am

**Callum McCaig** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to sum up for the SNP in this debate, which has been interesting. It has perhaps been a different debate from the one I anticipated, as the majority of contributions have been on the transfer of existing coal power plants to biomass, but I completely understand why that is. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) on securing the debate. It is good to get a hearing on this issue.

I met with Drax quite early on in my role as the SNP’s energy and climate change spokesperson and very much commend what it has done on shifting away from coal to biomass. There are issues around such large-scale production, which have been touched on, but if it is done right and done well—as I think it broadly is by Drax—it has a large role to play.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned research that suggested that converting just 500 MW of coal to biomass could save £2 billion for consumers, when looking at the whole-system cost. That is quite a remarkable piece of research to suggest such a level of savings.

One theme in the debate has been the need for both a level playing field and a long-term plan for biomass technology. I know the Government are very fond of their long-term economic plan. It is perhaps time they got a long-term energy plan—I note that that has the same acronym, so it could be used interchangeably. The two plans are tied together rather neatly: to have a long-term economic plan, we need a long-term energy plan. As we have heard, we very much require that plan to include biomass if we are to meet our decarbonisation targets.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the hidden costs of intermittent technologies; that is fair. His comment was that that is the “definition of a perverse outcome”. My definition of a perverse outcome would be applying the climate change levy to green energy production. I was surprised that that did not feature in his speech, given that when the levy was introduced in the Budget, Drax’s share price fell by 25% overnight.

**Nigel Adams:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. If he looks back in Hansard, he will discover that I raised that issue at the time—quite vociferously, in fact. It was the first time that I voted against my own party, to my regret, so it was a deeply held view.

**Callum McCaig:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. I would gladly check Hansard, but I have no requirement to do that as I will take him at his word. That is a point well made—touched, as they say.

UK energy production faces significant challenges due to the move away from coal. Significant power stations and traditional behemoths of energy production are coming off the market. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) said that ensuring we get the policy structure right before those power plants close is fundamental. She made a valid point about the incentive for the plants to be demolished. Once the power stations are gone, there is no going back.
The reuse and recycling of the existing transmission line infrastructure is a powerful point. We will get one opportunity to do this, and that opportunity is closing by the day as the power plants close. I would impress upon the Minister that if she and her Government think biomass has a role to play, as it is clear a number of hon. Members do, time is pressing to get the framework right to enable that to happen. I repeat: once the power stations and the transmission lines that take the power from them are down, the cost of establishing biomass on that kind of scale will be astronomical in comparison with what it was.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) talked about the positive benefit of biomass at a smaller, more localised level than the large-scale power plants on which other Members focused. He mentioned the 2,000 jobs in biomass in Scotland and the potential for more. The link between proximity of supply and production of energy through biomass is also important. While there will be a role to play for biomass in large-scale production, the use of it in a decentralised manner is very much a part of the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) talked about combined heat and power being a real and credible part of the future of biomass technology. In my own constituency, Aberdeen Heat and Power Company Ltd delivers heat, hot water and electricity through biomass to a number of my constituents and others across the city of Aberdeen. Its programme has resulted in a 56% reduction in emissions and, perhaps more startlingly, a reduction in bills of 50%.

Combined heat and power is used well elsewhere in the world, in particular on the continent. It has always struck me as perplexing that we have never utilised it on the same scale, because it is a pretty simple technology. It stops the wastage of electricity because it is converted into heat. If we can get that level of savings—by and large in deprived communities in Aberdeen—that is a win-win situation. I am pleased to see the Scottish Government looking at how combined heat and power can be ramped up as we look to meet our climate change commitments. We have discussed the different ways that the devolved Administrations and the UK Government can work. A lot can be learned from that example, and we would welcome that.

Albert Owen: In my contribution, I mentioned combining food and power. Does the hon. Gentleman have a comment to make on that, as a Front-Bench spokesman for his party? Does he see that as something that could be taken forward in different parts of the UK?

Callum McCraig: I thank the hon. Gentleman—I was coming on to his contribution. He made a number of interesting comments, several of which I agreed with. We will come to the nuclear issue, where there is a degree of disagreement. Combining food and power is an interesting way, particularly when looking at the more decentralised model. Agriculture is clearly a huge industry right across these islands, and there are significant waste products that can be used in different ways. I know there is huge potential for using the by-products of our agricultural production to produce energy through both biomass and biofuels. That requires an awful lot more investigation through research and development.

The conflict of land use in biomass was touched on. If, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) suggested, we focus primarily on using waste resources or sub-optimal land—forb and suchlike—that would allay a number of the fears of those who doubt the viability and compatibility of biomass as a way of achieving carbon reduction. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the requirement for a level playing field, and the fact that we require renewables, nuclear and energy efficiency to do that.

There was some debate about the apparent discrepancy between the SNP’s position on nuclear and our welcoming the extension of nuclear power plants in Scotland. On the face of it, that seems sensible, but one has to remember that there is an astronomical bill for decommissioning nuclear. Putting that out as long as possible, sweating those resources and ensuring we get the greatest return on them before we decommission them is sensible. The significant difference between biomass and nuclear, in terms of the benefit, is that the by-product from biomass will not be radioactive for 100,000 years and require billions of pounds to decommission.

The time is now. As with so many of the issues around energy and climate change, if we are to decarbonise, we need a sensible framework. A number of Members have pointed out where there are gaps in terms of biomass. They need to be closed, but the gaps in our energy policy more widely also need to be closed.

10.40 am

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): As hon. Members around the Chamber this morning have made clear, biomass has a substantial role to play in the move towards a low-carbon energy economy. Indeed, not only does it have a substantial role to play, but we should encourage the proper fulfilment of that role over the next period—I will come to that in a moment. We should also be clear about where biomass stands in the move towards a low-carbon economy and the extent to which it can play a role. In that respect, we need to be clear that, given the extent to which reasonable levels of feedstock can be provided to biomass over the next period—and, indeed, over the longer period, up to 2050—it can probably achieve penetration in the UK energy market of perhaps 12% or so.

I take that estimate from the Government’s UK bioenergy strategy, which the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) mentioned. We need to be clear that it is not the case that there is no strategy; there is a strategy—at the moment. Whether the present Government consider it to be their strategy now is another question, bearing in mind our discussions on the recent Energy Bill, for example, about the extent to which things that happened under the last Government really were or were not part of the Government’s strategy. Before we end proceedings this morning, I would be interested to know from the Minister whether she feels that her Government wish to continue to pursue that strategy, or whether she is in the process of writing a new bioenergy strategy for the future.

The existing strategy clearly places limits on the extent to which biomass can play a role in the move to a low-carbon economy. As my hon. Friend the Member
for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) emphasised, that underlines the fact that biomass has to play a role as part of a suite of technologies in order to provide the widest possible mix of energy over the next period.

We also ought to be clear that, as a low-carbon energy technology, biomass has to be just that: sustainable. As my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill both mentioned, sustainability is not just about where we get our biomass feedstock from, but about how we use land for biomass production, and the extent to which biomass production may push out other forms of production, or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn mentioned, the extent to which it takes place on marginal land. In the UK, Drax, for example, is encouraging the planting of short rotation coppicing production, Miscanthus grass and various other things, which can provide a sustainable source of biomass for those undertakings. It is important that biomass is fully sustainable, and of course that comes into play in ensuring that imports of biomass are fully certified across the board, as far as their origin and how they are produced are concerned.

Having said that, biomass certainly can play a clear and substantial role and can perhaps produce 10% to 12% of the UK’s energy requirements in future. That also emphasises the point that biomass should not be set against other forms of renewable energy. In that context, I was a little concerned about the suggestion from the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) that biomass should, as it were, be advantaged against other forms of renewable energy, because of its relationship to system integration costs, as far as the network is concerned.

Nigel Adams: I apologise if that is how my remarks came across. What I actually want for biomass generation is a level playing field—for the industry to be able to bid on an equal basis, taking into consideration the full system costs of all technologies. That is all I want: an opportunity for the industry to be able to bid on a level playing field, in a fair way. 

Dr Whitehead: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification, but perhaps I can also make a little clarification for him. He mentioned the NERA and Imperial College London report about system integration costs. That is an important report, but he should also know that a similar report from NERA and Imperial College London was produced about three months before the report that he mentioned. It so happened that the client for the other report was the Committee on Climate Change, as opposed to Drax. The questions that were asked in the two reports, which had identical authors at almost identical times, were slightly different and therefore produced fairly different results for overall system integration costs. Essentially, one looked at how biomass would relate to the system as it stands; the other looked at how it might relate to system changes.

One thing I am sure the hon. Gentleman would endorse is the extent to which system changes have to take place to ensure that those changes in the mix are integrated into the system as a whole—so, the periods over which energy is sourced, and what happens with transmission charges and how they may be levied in future for a particular location.

David Mowat: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he not accept, though, that it is a fact that intermittent forms of energy require back-up and that there is an associated cost that is not reflected in the CfD structure at the moment, which I think is the point that was being made?

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. There are system integration cost differentials between different forms of renewable energy. My point is that, depending on which report people read, those are not the same as they might appear to be between renewables. Indeed, what is undertaken in how the system works as a whole can substantially mitigate the different costs, so that, as we evolve the system, we can be in a much better position to ensure that the suite of different renewables—which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn mentioned, is so important for future low-carbon deployment—can properly be deployed happily alongside one another, as a suite of measures to ensure that we move towards a decarbonised economy.

I recognise that we have limited time this morning, so I want to turn briefly to the point the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty made about the level playing field that is necessary for biomass. It is undoubtedly the case, given the measures that are in place at the moment for the enhancement of renewable energy, that there is not a level playing field. There is an overall problem with that suite of measures because of the levy control framework and the extent to which hardly anybody is likely to get a contract for difference for their project over the next period. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that some biomass plants got contracts under the early investment decisions, prior to the new form of CfDs coming into being. However, when it comes to the efficiency of biomass, allowing with CHP schemes to ensure that biomass can get 15-year contracts under the CfD arrangements, even if the heat source is not there for 15 years, is an important change that would need to be made to CfD arrangements for the future.

As for the renewable heat incentive, the fact that there are no guarantees for tariffs between commencement and completion of a project if a biomass plant is trying to go for RHI seems to be an omission for the future that should be rectified as far as their admission to those arrangements—

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. Dr Whitehead, if we are not careful, we will not hear the Minister, and I really want to hear her.

Dr Whitehead: I appreciate that, Mr Crausby. I will bring my remarks to a close immediately.

My view is that it will be necessary to ensure a level playing field in the future arrangements for low-carbon energy: indeed, whether biomass should be accessible to the capacity market as part of those arrangements might be a consideration the Minister is thinking about. I will be interested to hear from her what arrangements
may be made for CfDs and RHI for that level playing field to ensure that biomass plays the role that all of us here this morning want it to play in the future of renewables.

10.52 am

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) on securing this debate and, in particular, on being such a champion of Drax. He and I have had many conversations about it. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) here supporting Rugeley, which is absolutely right. I have enormous sympathy for the people affected by yesterday’s incident at Didcot, which was a long-standing and good source of energy for the UK. It was a great tragedy.

Every hon. Member here will know that our priorities are to move to decarbonisation at the lowest cost while ensuring that lights stay on. This debate has shown that there are many ways of achieving that. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) for pointing out that a balanced energy policy is needed—the shadow Minister also made that point. It cannot be all or nothing.

The installed biomass capacity of all biomass technologies at the end of 2014 was 5.4 GW, which is no small capacity. Of that, biomass combustion was about 3 GW, landfill gas was 1 GW and energy from waste was coming up to 1 GW. That is impressive and the technology certainly plays its part, from potentially low-carbon dispatchable energy to uses in heat and transport biofuel applications and from extracting energy from waste products to injection of low-carbon gas into our gas grid.

It has been pointed out that we cannot go ahead without careful consideration of the effects, both positive and negative, that biomass can have on the wider environment. Unlike other renewable technologies, biomass cannot rely on an inexhaustible fuel like the wind, tides or sunshine. The fuels on which biomass is dependent need to be sourced responsibly and sustainably, and in a manner that realises the carbon and greenhouse gas savings that biomass is capable of delivering. Our renewable energy policy seeks to balance those considerations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty asked about CfDs auctions. He will know that, in November 2015, the Secretary of State announced that if, and only if, the Secretary of State is satisfied that the proposals in the NERA report regarding whole-system costs, but the reports that he and the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) mentioned consist of a subset of technologies and we must look carefully at whole-system costs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) asked whether subsidies can be available for co-firing. I assure him that subsidies are still available through the renewables obligation. Fiddlers Ferry in his constituency has previously co-fired under the renewables obligation and can take advantage of that scheme until 2027.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase asked how the correct mix should look going forward. I assure him that we recognise there are implications when looking at proposals to end coal generation. It is important to have clear consultation on that, which we will announce shortly. In particular, we will look at how that might impact on coal-fired power stations that are currently co-firing.

The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) raised his proud point that Scotland is doing so well on renewables, but I remind him that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty pointed out, over 20% of the support under the renewables obligation as a whole goes to Scotland with far less of Great Britain’s population. Scotland received 24% of RO payments in 2014-15 and will receive significantly more than its per capita share, so it would be fair if the hon. Gentleman credited the UK Government and Great Britain’s bill payers with the Scottish Government’s achievements in renewable energy.

Philip Boswell: Will the Minister give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry, I will not give way.

The hon. Member for Inverclyde asked why the Government are cutting RHI support. The RHI budget to cover renewable heat schemes has been confirmed to March 2021, rising each year to a total of £1.15 billion. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) referred to biomass CHP. We are considering our proposals for that for the forthcoming RHI consultation. We will refine our current policy so that it delivers improved value for money to taxpayers and targets biomass in line with the Government’s long-term approach to heat decarbonisation, focusing on large biomass and biomass for process and district heating, and to encourage deployment that is sustainable without subsidy in future.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test asked about the bioenergy strategy published by the previous Government in 2012. It set out a direction for biomass and recommended supporting sustainably produced biomass to deliver real greenhouse gas savings cost-effectively and taking account the wider impact across the economy. A great deal has happened in the industry since it was written, but those recommendations remain compatible with our current intentions.

Finally, as many hon. Members have pointed out, bioenergy contributes to the UK economy, creates jobs in the fuel supply chain in harvesting, processing and transport, and creates opportunities for foresters, farmers and UK ports and railways. It remains and will continue
to remain important, bringing many benefits to the UK in decarbonisation, security of supply and economic benefit. I remain of the view that, when sourced responsibly, biomass can provide a cost-effective, low-carbon and controllable source of renewable energy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered biomass as a source of renewable energy.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the proposed sale of Kneller Hall, Whitton by the Ministry of Defence.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. This is about the sale of Kneller Hall, but it is about more than that; it is about Whitton, and Whitton’s history. The proposed sale of Kneller Hall was announced by the Ministry of Defence in a statement just a few weeks ago. Listed in that statement were about a dozen Ministry of Defence sites. Kneller Hall is the exceptional one in that list, because this is not about a building, but about a community.

It is no ordinary building and no ordinary site. Kneller Hall in effect is Whitton, and Whitton is Kneller Hall, which brings me to my first request of my hon. Friend the Minister. I am grateful that he is here to listen to some of the concerns of residents and, I hope, to agree to my requests and to reconsider the sale of Kneller Hall. My first request is that the Minister will get Ministry of Defence personnel to come to Whitton, preferably to Kneller Hall and preferably with the commandant, Colonel Barry Jenkins, who I notice is in the Public Gallery, because the Ministry of Defence needs to tell the community of Whitton face to face the reasons for the sale of Kneller Hall, and the Ministry of Defence needs to hear Whitton’s reasons why it is not a good idea.

It is tragic and extraordinary that in peacetime the Ministry of Defence has managed to create such hostility in a peace-loving community—the community of Whitton. The Ministry of Defence may have estate agents, but it needs historians and psychologists. If the Ministry of Defence had good historians, it would know that Kneller Hall has been in Whitton for nearly 150 years. It would know that Kneller Hall was created because a cousin of Queen Victoria, George, Duke of Cambridge, realised that top-quality musicians, well rehearsed, are essential to inspiring the military. That is our heritage and legacy, which began nearly 150 years ago, in Whitton.

I understand that new military recruits are taken round the museum at Kneller Hall, and in that museum are musical instruments going back to the Crimean war. There is even a musical instrument that was played by a boy soldier at the battle of Waterloo. In the museum, on all the walls, are pictures of all the people who have passed through Kneller Hall—all the top-class musicians—so new recruits know that they are part of an important legacy and an important heritage. Just as every recruit goes through the museum at Kneller Hall to know how much they belong there—they belong for life—every resident of Whitton feels that belonging and that link to Kneller Hall. This is not about a building, but about a community.

The Ministry of Defence notice talks about releasing sites for housing. In London, yes, we need housing, but housing needs to be part of a community. Kneller Hall is the identity of Whitton; it is the heart and soul of Whitton. We cannot rip out the heart and soul of a community and all its identity and replace it with housing that has no identity. That is not what I believe we want as a Government when we say that we want more housing in London. This is a unique site, in a unique
place. Whitton is not a suburb. Whitton is a unique community, and that uniqueness comes from Kneller Hall.

The Minister may well know, and perhaps some historians in the Ministry of Defence know, that over the years there have been proposals to sell Kneller Hall. My predecessor but one, Toby Jessel, fought the sale of Kneller Hall in the 1980s and in the 1990s. I hope the Minister will join the late Margaret Thatcher and Michael Heseltine and Jeremy Hanley, who realised the importance of Kneller Hall and saved it then.

I would like to quote what Toby Jessel said when he was MP for Twickenham. In the 1990s, in a debate in the House of Commons, he said that there were eight reasons why we should keep Kneller Hall. Those eight reasons are still relevant today. He said that Kneller Hall is a world-famous institution. As the Minister will know from the press, people such as Howard Goodall have been saying how important and internationally famous Kneller Hall is today.

Toby Jessel said that a large sum had been spent on Kneller Hall. My freedom of information requests, answered just last week, have shown that more than £1 million has been spent over the last few years—since I became an MP and just before—on Kneller Hall, so that reason is still relevant today.

Toby said it is the largest of the three schools of music. Importantly, he noted—Toby is a musician himself—that it is half an hour from London, so specialist teachers can travel easily to Kneller Hall. We need that for Kneller Hall’s excellence. If the military move away from this school of music, it will not have access to those specialist teachers in the same way. Toby Jessel said in the 1990s that it has a good bandstand, and it is still there today.

Kneller Hall draws large audiences. Again, it is the heart and soul of Whitton. The Proms at Kneller Hall are far better than the Proms at the Albert hall, because it is a community event; it is about the identity of the community. Toby said that Kneller Hall has the capacity to take in the training of the Royal Marines and Royal Air Force bands. That is still possible. And Toby said that it could not be sold for much. Interestingly, I think that this is where the Ministry of Defence estate agents have got it wrong. The Kneller Hall site is metropolitan open land. The Ministry of Defence estate agents did not realise that there are tree preservation orders on most of the trees on the site. We cannot break the heart of a community and replace it with soulless housing. I am sure that that is not the intention of the Minister. If the Minister would like to quote what Toby Jessel said when he was MP for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) for obtaining the House of my interest as a member of the Army Reserves.

I would like to start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) for obtaining this debate on the future of Kneller Hall, a Ministry of Defence site in her constituency. Her drive to stand up for the interests of her community is commendable—an example that should be followed by all. I want to acknowledge from the outset that the Department is ever-mindful of the emotive nature of estate rationalisation, and that the concerns and feelings of the local community have been, and will continue to be, considered as part of this decision-making process.

I announced to the House on 18 January 2016 that, as part of the Government’s prosperity agenda, the MOD is committed to releasing land to contribute towards 55,000 new housing units this Parliament. Kneller Hall is one of the first 12 sites to be announced for release. Alone, those sites are expected to generate some £500 million in land receipts—a significant and valuable reinvestment for Defence—and approximately 15,400 housing units across the 12 sites. However, our work goes far beyond that important goal. Our footprint strategy is about chairing a path to a more effective, affordable estate that better enables military capability. In that context, it is fair to say that the vast majority of the Defence footprint is currently under review, as the Department gains momentum in the complex planning work necessary to provide the brave men and women of our armed forces with a more effective, fit-for-purpose estate.

Some have written that Kneller Hall is “part of our community” and a Whitton “institution”. Others say, “Stop selling our heritage.” Typical comments include things like “My grandfather was there as a boy soldier”, “My uncle used to teach there” or, “My daughter trained there.” Some say that there is no other school of music like it in the world and that it is short-sighted to allow the loss of such a revered establishment.

Importantly, somebody—not me—wrote on the Facebook page, “Kneller Hall is part of the big society that Mr Cameron values.” Others commented that, “Selling off the family jewels springs to mind”, and said that we should not destroy what is good about the UK. Nikki, who set up the online petition wrote, “Where was the public and local opinion in all of this?”

I would like the Minister to reconsider the sale of Kneller Hall, and to arrange for a public meeting, which I will host, preferably at Kneller Hall. Now—Queen Elizabeth’s 90th year—is not the time to sell Kneller Hall. Neither is it the time to sell Kneller Hall when one of the musicians, Dave Barnes, is in a national television musical competition. I do not want him playing the “Last Post” at the finals of that competition and I do not want Whitton to have its own “Brassed Off” drama. This is not the time.

I am privileged to be speaking to the Minister because he is a courageous man. He has served in the Army—I have seen his medals. However, it is not courageous to lead the retreat from Kneller Hall. He will not get a medal for that, but I will personally pin a medal to his chest if he saves Kneller Hall.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I start by reminding the House of my interest as a member of the Army Reserves.
The residents of Twickenham and its surrounding boroughs are not alone in their strength of feeling and, indeed, in their drive to want to retain a local Defence presence. However, the simple fact is that these plans are not directed at individual communities, regiments or bases. This is about ensuring that Government funding is in the right place to ensure the continued defence and security of the United Kingdom.

Dr Mathias: The Minister said that Twickenham is not alone, but does he agree that the petition presented to the Commons and the online petition are unique among the 12 sites mentioned in the January notice?

Mark Lancaster: It is certainly the only petition of which I am aware among the 12 sites. I do, however, imagine that by the end of the process there will be other petitions on many other sites across the UK, because it is absolutely understandable that individual local communities feel strongly about their relationships with Defence. This is an ever-evolving issue so I sense that there will be more petitions to come, which is something I regret, but that is the nature of the job I have to do as I seek to rationalise the Defence estate in the best possible way to deliver Defence outputs.

Kneller Hall is the home of the Corps of Army Music and the Royal Military School of Music, two organisations that are of great significance to the United Kingdom. Despite that sentiment, the facilities in which they are currently housed are ageing, inefficient and not fit for purpose. How can it be that an organisation that contributes so much at home and overseas is expected to train and operate out of an old and failing site? The school and the headquarters have a very small footprint. There are 43 military and 30 civilian staff permanently employed at the site. Regardless, it is unfair that those 73 people have to endure ageing single living accommodation and sub-optimal facilities that do not meet appropriate training standards. The fact is that the site just is not designed for its current use. It is a stately home, not a school, and it is definitely not a military training facility. To bring the site up to standard for its current use would cost at least £30 million.

So what can we do with the site? Do we invest over £30 million of taxpayers’ money in an ageing site that houses fewer than 75 staff? Should Defence invest in a site where maintenance costs will continue to rise over the years? Is that really in the best interests of Defence and military capability, and the best use of taxpayers’ money? I have looked at this case and concluded that that would not be the right decision for Defence. Disposal would offer better value for money and, crucially, better military capability. Every additional pound we spend here is a pound that cannot be spent on the frontline.

Mark Lancaster: I cannot give an exact answer now, but I am happy to come back to my hon. Friend. I believe that the £30 million dates back to 2009, so I would imagine that, in today’s prices, it is even greater.

The MOD is reviewing a number of options regarding the future of the capability currently provided at Kneller Hall. For instance, the parent headquarters, the Royal School of Military Engineering, has barracks at both Chatham and Minley with vastly improved technical and domestic accommodation. It also has the necessary vacant space required to house the personnel currently employed at Kneller Hall, irrespective of whether they are military or civilian. The commandant of the Royal Military School of Music has confirmed that either site, with suitable re-provision, would provide far better and greatly improved training facilities for his people.

The Department has considered the prospect of relocating other Army units to the Kneller Hall site. The problem is that there just is not the space and the facilities are not in a good enough condition. Kneller Hall just is not suitable. Both Chatham and Minley are still within reasonable travelling distance of London and the south-west, the main locations of the customers of the British Army’s 41 bands. There are generous practice and teaching rooms in place at both sites, since they are modern technical colleges and already host military bands. As well as that, the accommodation is of a more than suitable standard to home the junior soldiers that make up the future of Army music—those who are at the very beginning of their career.

I recognise that our announcements to close sites are unsettling for units, for their families and for our civilian staff. We will do all we can to provide them with the necessary certainty of their future locations as soon as practicable. As an independent site, Kneller Hall requires its own guard force of 18 servicemen and women. It needs its own independent integrated logistical section and its own administrative personnel. If the sites were collocated, these highly skilled service personnel could be employed in more operationally vital posts. Furthermore, the freeing of the site could make way for the provision of up to 192 new homes, which are required to meet the UK’s ever-growing housing demand.

I recognise my hon. Friend’s concerns on the nature of the community, which is precisely why this is very much a two-stage process. The first stage is establishing that there is not a military use for the site, but the second stage—the future—is for the local community to decide. The MOD will engage with the local community and the local planning authority to decide the best future for the site.

Dr Mathias: Again, I appreciate the Minister’s giving way. He talks about 192 homes, but has the Ministry of Defence already been in communication with Richmond borough’s planning department? If so, the community is unaware of it.

Mark Lancaster: Yes, I can confirm that the Defence Infrastructure Organisation has been in touch with Richmond’s planning department, so that process has started. Again, I make it clear that the disposal of this site is based on military capability need, which alone will generate the disposal of this site. The second process—the potential building of new homes—is a secondary issue; it is all about delivering military capability.

Where do we go from here? Much work is still required to ensure timely and efficient closure of the unit and the relocation of the occupants. There are also a number of third-party users of the site that we would wish to give the opportunity to find alternative locations. Important engagement will continue to take place with the local
council and planning authorities. We have negotiated a number of compromises on the site’s future use and occupation, including ensuring that the area of metropolitan open land that sits within the unit’s boundaries remains untouched, and that the trees on the site continue to be protected and preserved. I confirm that I am happy for specialists from my Department to attend a public meeting on the process for disposing of the site, should my hon. Friend wish to arrange one.

The MOD follows a set process for disposing of any site, as do all Government Departments. Once declared surplus to defence requirements, a site is placed on a register of surplus public sector land, a database managed by the Cabinet Office, which provides an opportunity for other public bodies to express interest in acquiring sites before they are placed on the open market. As already mentioned, however, the MOD will continue to proceed with the plan for housing, liaising with the local council and planning authorities to ensure the best possible future use for the site. That will present an opportunity for the local community to engage with the MOD on the future use of the site, which will not be disposed of before 2018.

I acknowledge and recognise the emotive nature of closing sites, especially ones such as Kneller Hall that have been at the centre of a community for many years. I am delighted to say that I understand the Army will continue to play proms to the public in the park in the summer. I appreciate wholeheartedly the concerns of my hon. Friend and her constituency, and I assure her that great consideration is given to all military establishments, along with their historical and national significance, but as I have already mentioned, this is not about individual communities, bases, regiments or units; it is about ensuring that the MOD has an updated, efficient and rationalised estate that is fit for purpose and fit for it to operate now and into the future. This is about ensuring that the right resources are in the right place to keep Britain safe.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.
lacked on several occasions when some massive offices were going to be built on the advanced manufacturing park—which is actually in Rotherham, but on the edge of Sheffield—on the basis that thousands of civil service jobs were supposed to be going there. Of course, that never happened, unfortunately.

We can also put this into perspective by considering infrastructure expenditure in the north, which stands at £539 per head, as opposed to £3,386 per head in London. When we are presented with such statistics, it is no wonder that people say that this concept of the northern powerhouse is little more than words.

This move is all about, I believe, accommodating large reductions in head count and nothing to do with the Department’s core function of boosting business. I have been contacted by several constituents regarding the closure. One of them says:

“I’ve worked in the civil service for”...

I am going to say that this person is now in their third decade in the civil service—

“ten years in London and the rest in Sheffield. For the majority of that time, I have worked in teams that have been split site between Sheffield and London. To my knowledge, there has never been any issues regarding the quality of work or negative impact on policy decisions/policy work due to operating split site teams.

Aside from the obvious impact on me personally with respect to having to find another job, I am concerned about the effect this decision will have on the City of Sheffield and surrounding areas. I am still trying to understand why the Department for Business would take such a step.”

This announcement comes alongside the recent announcements by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs about job cuts, and the fact that funding has been withdrawn entirely from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, which is based in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) and which is part of the BIS 2020 initiative. Words fail me. What should have been happening for decades in this country now seems to be in reverse. These announcements clearly send out completely the wrong type of message to large businesses that might be looking to invest in Yorkshire or other northern cities and towns.

**John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab):** Is not the answer to the question that my right hon. Friend’s constituent put—“Why?”—that this is about crude number-cutting of budgets, jobs and offices? At a time when knowledge of economies outside London and support for the creation of jobs and businesses outside London is needed more than ever, surely this is a short-term decision that will also prove to be counterproductive.

**Kevin Barron:** I completely agree with my right hon. Friend’s analysis. The decision is completely at odds with this concept—it is not much more than a concept—and promise of money of the northern powerhouse. Under the circumstances, these are the worst signals in the world that central Government could send to the north.

Not only will the closure be devastating for South Yorkshire; it will lead to a huge loss of expertise for the Department—for example, the person I have just quoted, who has been in their job for decades. The idea that they can uplift and come down to work in London, even if they could afford to buy a property in London, is a very difficult thing to imagine.

Nick Hillman, who was formerly a special adviser to David Willetts during his time as universities and science Minister, has described this closure as

“a genuine tragedy for good public policymaking.”

He says that the Sheffield civil servants

“hold BIS’ institutional memory on HE and often know more than the policymakers who are nominally closer to the centre of power.”

The staff in Sheffield work closely with external organisations, such as employers and education providers, visiting them to explain policies about funding, deregulation, further and higher education, and Government strategy on rail, as well as listening to their issues so as to better inform policy. Having purely London-based staff will mean additional costs, particularly as a result of pay differentials and a less prompt service for organisations based in the midlands and the north. Gone will be the knowledge and understanding of localities, sectors and industries that can make a difference to effective policy making and allocation of funding.

I have spent more than 30 years in this Parliament now, and for most of that time I have heard many people who believe—people from all parts of the House; Ministers of all political colours, as if they do not recognise it—that north of Watford is a strange land. Bringing more people down from the north to work in London will just bolster that attitude and, I have to say to the Minister, is fundamentally wrong.

Sheffield staff are also responsible for applying ministerial strategy and policies on the ground. For example, BIS sites such as the Sheffield site ought to be in the vanguard of helping the Government to rebalance the economy and supporting such rebalancing in the sectors that are most prevalent in their respective regions. It seems particularly strange that BIS, with its supposed ambition to create more geographically balanced growth, should take this decision, when other Departments, such as the Department for Education, plan to remain in Sheffield.

Can the Minister explain that to us—not just to the Members from Sheffield who are here today, but to other Members from the region as well?

Another constituent drew my attention to the fact that BIS Sheffield has recently advertised for a level 3 apprenticeship in the very office that the Department is planning to close in 18 months. In fact, the closing date for the apprenticeship applications is today—I have the advert with me, and the closing date is 24 February. The post is fixed-term for 18 months from April 2016. There is no mention at all of the office closing in 18 months, so any hope of a permanent job at the end will be non-existent. Indeed, to be honest, who would really want to work in that atmosphere of despondency and anger? I find it hard to understand the mentality or the morality of carrying out such an exercise in the current climate—and, of course, it costs public money as well. Under the circumstances, it seems wrong.

The comments made by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) in response to the urgent question on 29 January stick a little in my throat. She said:

“As I say, in difficult times when we have to make sure that we continue with our long-term economic plan, difficult decisions have to be made, but we take the view that this is the best way to spend public money more efficiently and more effectively.”—[Official Report, 29 January 2016, Vol. 605, c. 562.]"
If that is the case, it is simple. My understanding is that a report was written about the “BIS 2020” initiative. It was about the closure—not just of Sheffield, but potentially of some other regional offices as well—but it has never seen the light of day. I say this to the Minister, and to the Government: I do not blame the Minister. That report was created by public money and we have the right to see the business case for the change. And I will tell you who has the right to see it more than anyone else: the 247 people who have this cloud hanging over them. I urge the Government to publish the facts, so that we can properly review the decision.

2.41 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Howarth. I congratulate and thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) for securing this debate on the closure of the office. The office is in my constituency, but the closure has a far wider impact, and that is reflected by the Members here from across the region. It is a blow not just for Sheffield, but for a region that has been trying to engage positively with the Government on the northern powerhouse. I hope that the Minister will engage positively with us on the concerns that are being expressed.

I have some sympathy with the Minister; the decision seems to have been driven by senior managers—I am delighted to see the permanent secretary here—but it is falling apart under scrutiny. Ministers have been put in a difficult position. They have been briefed, and when my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) asked her urgent question, Members were told that the decision has been taken to save money. Meanwhile, staff in the office in Sheffield have been told that there has been no cost-benefit analysis. Under questioning at the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee on 10 February, the permanent secretary as much as admitted that there was no business case for the decision. It is not too late, however. The Minister is a thoughtful man, and I hope that he will approach the issue in the same way as he has his Green Paper on higher education—we have discussed it on many occasions—listening to concerns, sharing them with his colleagues and agreeing to an open discussion of the options.

The House of Commons Library’s briefing for the debate described the Sheffield office as one of a number of regional offices and somehow mixed it up with the network of 80 offices. I have raised that issue with the Library, but for the record, we must be clear that the Sheffield office has a head office function that happens to be taking place in Sheffield, and for good reason. I have spoken to a number of the staff in the office, and they are shocked not simply that their jobs are being taken away, but that those jobs are going without a single good argument being advanced in defence of the decision. They are senior policy staff, and they help make Government decisions. They are used to looking at evidence, evaluating it carefully and advising Ministers, and they are shocked that the rules about effective and responsible decision making have not been applied to them.

The staff have many questions, and I will start with four that I would like the Minister to answer. First, why does the 90-day consultation period not include consultation on the rationale to close the Sheffield office? Secondly, why does it not give those affected the chance to examine the business case and discuss alternatives? Thirdly, why does it not invite alternative proposals for other models that would work well for Government and provide best value for taxpayers? I have some more questions later, but the final one for this cluster is: why does the documentation state that the 90-day consultation closes on 2 May 2016 when it also states that a final decision on the closure of the Sheffield site is planned by the end of March? That is five weeks before the consultation closes.

People in the office and more widely in the region are genuinely bewildered. This Government talk about the northern powerhouse, are supposedly committed to a diverse civil service and regularly talk about value for money, but in the case of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, apparently they want all their policy jobs to be based in the most expensive city in the country because—this may not be the case, and the Minister can clarify things, but it is what staff have been told by senior managers—Ministers cannot be supported by people based elsewhere. Frankly, it just does not add up.

On the business case, I recognise that the Minister is in a difficult position, because the permanent secretary was unable to share any facts on which the decision was based. The first line of the restructuring proposal form, which was sent to all staff on 17 February, makes the case for the decision. It states: “BIS is required to make significant savings by 2020.”

I have a simple question for the Minister—I hope he can succeed where the permanent secretary failed at the Select Committee—which is this: how much money will the proposal to move all policy jobs to London save? If he wishes, he can intervene on me now.

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): I will come back later.

Paul Blomfield: I look forward to the answer. The civil servants whose jobs are on the line as a result of the decision are familiar with the concept of making savings for the public purse. They are engaged in that very pursuit in delivering the Government’s agenda on apprenticeships and further and higher education. They work within strict financial constraints, but were they to make a proposal without any evidence of the budgetary implications, the Minister would agree that they were not doing their jobs properly. Why are the Government, elected on the back of a promise to supposedly balance the books, so reluctant to publish the business case for the decision? I fear, from my exchange with the permanent secretary during his appearance before the Select Committee, that it is because there is no such document and no such business case. Will the Minister clarify the basis on which the decision was made, if not to save money?

In the documents that have been published, the proposed “combined regional footprint” that will remain—this is mentioned in the restructuring proposal form—“the FE funding centre (location yet to be decided)”, the HE funding centre and “possibly a regulation centre in Birmingham” are all part of the new vision. How much will all those things cost? We do not know. We do not know because the Department does not know, but how on earth can they be less expensive?
The Government’s own estate strategy, which was published in 2014, points out that the cost of space in Whitehall is expensive. It cites the Ministry of Defence main building at a cost of £35,000 a year a person, compared with the Home Office buildings in Croydon at £3,000 a person. That is less than a tenth of the cost, and Sheffield is less expensive still, and that is before we take account of central London weighting and the extra staffing costs involved. The decision, which has huge consequences for my constituents, the city and the region, has been made on the basis of so little fact and evidence.

There is a wider issue, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley alluded to, about the way that this country is run. There is real value in locating policy making in the regions and nations of Britain. That is why successive Governments have moved Departments out of London. I remember when the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher moved the Manpower Services Commission to Sheffield in 1981, and such moves continued under Labour. That policy stalled under the coalition and is now thrown into reverse. Before the Minister wheels out the line that more BIS jobs are based outside London, let me remind him that the focus of this debate is on the highly skilled policy jobs that are at the centre of the decision.

Too many decisions in this country are made through the prism of the personal experience of people who live, work and bring their families up in London. The rest of the country is different. We need more people who live their lives, like most of the population, outside London bringing their experience into policy making. The Department for Education carried out its own review of its estate. The review stated:

“We benefit from maintaining sites around the country—we get alternative perspectives on our policy issues, we can draw from a wider recruitment pool, and employing people in sites outside London helps to keep costs down.”

If that is important for the DFE, why does it not apply to BIS? The Minister risks his own goals if he loses some of his most experienced staff just as he embarks on an ambitious programme in higher education. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley cited the special adviser of the Minister’s predecessor, David Willets. His special adviser, respected by all parties in Parliament, described the move as “a genuine tragedy for good public policymaking.”

Is the Minister not concerned about the loss of talent? I hope he will come back on that point. What assessment has he made of the loss of jobs on the successful delivery of the policy agenda for higher education, further education and apprenticeships?

There is another issue about creating a diverse civil service. Earlier this month, Cabinet Office Ministers launched the Bridge report to achieve the Government’s stated aim of creating, “a public sector that reflects the diverse nature of the UK”.

They launched it with a fanfare, and the head of the civil service, Sir Jeremy Heywood, said:

“The Bridge Group report offers potential nuggets of gold, not just for the civil service but for the UK...The problem is that talent is everywhere but opportunity is not.”

One of the plans arising from that report to address inequality in the public sector states that we need “new terms in place which make it easier for civil servants to live outside London.”

How on earth can the Government square that circle? Where is the joined-up thinking?

The Bridge report also found that the number of people in the civil service from poorer backgrounds is shockingly low, with only 4.4% of successful applicants coming from working-class backgrounds. Does the Minister think this move will increase that figure? What equality impact assessment has been made of the decision? It cannot be right that we restrict opportunities to those who can afford to live and work in London, and who have the option to do so without commitments elsewhere. The Government could massively reduce the talent pool from which they recruit with this move, so why are they narrowing their options?

Staff in Sheffield have been told by BIS board members that the reason for the move is because Ministers want them close by. I do not believe that. I think Ministers are more open-minded and more innovative than that. It runs counter to the Government’s own estate strategy, published in October 2014, which stated:

“Civil servants should be able to work flexibly across locations at times that are convenient to them and their managers”.

It went on:

“Some parts of the civil service and the private sector still have an inflexible, command-and-control model where people are managed more by their presence than by achievement.”

The decision seems to confirm that that is how BIS wants to continue to run itself.

The killer blow to the rationale for this decision is at the bottom of page 11 of that document:

“With modern IT, officials no longer necessarily need to be physically present, for example to brief ministers.”

I am sure the Minister will concur with that point. Has this decision been taken behind closed doors because somebody had the bright idea that it might be easier for Ministers if they sit on the floor above their policy people rather than pick up the phone, use the video link or plan meetings in advance? No assessment has been made of the expertise and experience lost; of the impact on access to and diversity in the civil service; or of the way in which decisions are made in this country, never mind the cost to the public purse.

Finally, let me reflect on the thoughts of the Department’s most senior civil servant, the permanent secretary Martin Donnelly. It is good to see him here. Almost a year ago to the day, he published a blog post on his experience after the Department had undergone huge change back in 2011. The title of the piece is, “Leadership Statement: Talk less, listen more”. I have a copy that the Minister might want to share afterwards. Mr Donnelly writes that, “people felt that the process has been done to them not by them.”

He was right. It was a problem then, and it is a problem the Department is on the brink of repeating now. But it is not too late. I urge Mr Donnelly and the Minister to listen to the hugely talented civil servants based in Sheffield. I urge them to listen to the head of the civil service, whose statement, made less than a month ago, I make no apology for repeating:

“Talent is everywhere but opportunity is not.”
I hope that the Minister will confirm today that the Government will publish the papers that have informed this decision and I hope he will commit to reviewing it. Is that really too much to ask?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. To accommodate everyone who has indicated that they want to speak, I am imposing a seven-minute time limit on speeches.

2.56 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I apologise to you, to the Chamber and to the Minister because I will have to leave before the end of the debate owing to constituency business.

The decision to close the Business, Innovation and Skills office in Sheffield feels like the latest example of Tory scorn for the north. Yet again, we are faced with major job losses in the north as a direct result of the actions of a Government seemingly unable to look beyond the confines of London and the south. We have 247 staff now facing redundancy, having been informed that their jobs would be moving to London. The Government have described this as a transfer, yet they offer no guarantee that those affected will be allowed to transfer if they so wish, only that they “may be able to”. For those facing such uncertain futures, that is small comfort.

In her letter to me, Baroness Neville-Rolfe acknowledged that the Department is “very likely to take the opportunity to make some of the significant headcount reductions” that the budget requires. The Department has said that staff will receive comprehensive support, but we do not yet know what the support will involve. We do know that it will most likely not include any financial support for either travel or relocation costs. In effect, the Government’s commitment to staff amounts to a promise that they might be able to keep their jobs but, if they do, it will be at their own expense, and very likely a significant expense.

The Government’s statements are contradictory. They continue to talk of a transfer. I found Baroness Neville-Rolfe’s words to me to be very telling. She said she would “take the opportunity” to cut jobs. Do the Government really see a huge job loss in the north as an opportunity? Yet again, they label this as a transfer. I found Baroness Neville-Rolfe’s words to me to be very telling. She said she would “take the opportunity” to cut jobs. Do the Government really see a huge job loss in the north as an opportunity? Yet again, they label this as a transfer. For those facing such uncertain futures, that is small comfort.

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The north has borne the brunt of the Government’s ideologically driven agenda, as it did the last time the Tories were in power. Time and again, we see the Government taking actions that hit the north disproportionately hard. Most recently, they announced a £300 million transitional fund to help local authorities that are struggling to implement Tory cuts. It speaks volumes that the five least deprived local authority areas will collectively receive £5.3 million, while the five most deprived will receive nothing. Each of the five areas most in need are in the north.

Sheffield City Council’s central Government funding has fallen by almost 50% since 2010. From the ever-deeper cuts to local authority budgets to the abject failure to support the steel industry, the Government have shown disdain for the north. A long line of examples show up the empty rhetoric of the northern powerhouse. The Government are delegating cuts to the north and calling it devolution.
3.3 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on securing the debate.

It is good to see the Minister in his place. This is the second time that a Minister has had to be dragged before Labour MPs to account for the decision on the Sheffield BIS office after the shoddy, shocking way in which the announcement was made. There was no consultation or wider strategy; just the permanent secretary turning up on a Thursday morning and a low-key press release on the Government website later that day. So far, we have heard a good deal of rhetoric from Ministers but not a lot of genuine debate.

I hope that today will change things, that the Minister will reflect on this decision, and that we can have a thoughtful conversation, because the workers at risk of being laid off, who I know will be watching closely today, see a plan that, I am sorry to say, seems to be based on assumptions and tired thinking not fit for a Department that is supposed to be preparing us for a century of innovation and change. They see a decision that, as we have heard, is not backed up by a business case that looks at the decision to close the Sheffield BIS office alone and what the office brings. After all, it differs significantly from local offices throughout the country—something Ministers do not seem to have grasped entirely when they signed off the BIS 2020 plan.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) asked for during the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee hearing, after his request for a comprehensive document was rebuffed, any scrap of paper will do—any shred of evidence or jottings on the back of a fag packet. It is clear that nothing has been forthcoming, because we have received nothing at all. As my hon. Friend asked: how much money will this decision save? It is hard to see it saving a single penny of taxpayers’ money, not least because the lease for the office will still be held by the Department for Education, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) said.

This is a serious problem. If the Government are to demonstrate any genuine commitment at all to the northern powerhouse, they will have to move away from the lazy assumptions that underlie the justifications for keeping policy making in London Departments, move away from the belief that London water-cooler conversations matter because they take place in close proximity to Ministers, and move away from the belief that the intangible benefits far outweigh historic knowledge of an area and a different perspective on investment in a northern hub.

The Government have shown wanton disrespect for the workforce at the Sheffield office, giving flimsy justifications. First, they were told that the decision was based on saving money, which, as we have heard, will be next to impossible. Then, it was about policy. At a later meeting, it was because the phones and computers did not work properly—this at the Department responsible for innovation, in the 21st century.

The decision reveals tired thinking from senior Whitehall officials who, when asked what they wanted the Department to look like in 2020, came back with the same old Whitehall answer: a centralised command and control HQ, based in London, where all employees are within eyesight and earshot and fresh perspective is discouraged. When the solution of power and resources is supposed to top the agenda, the Department cannot seriously take a Kremlinesque approach to policy and decision making.

How can we expect a centralised HQ issuing orders from London to have the same insight and perspective on regional investment as we currently enjoy in Sheffield? That perspective has been built over years of working and living in the community and comes with an historic understanding of what works and why our northern regions are so very different from London. It betrays the Government’s thinking. When push comes to shove, they have instinctively retreated into their comfort zone, insulating themselves in a London bubble. It says a lot about where the northern powerhouse comes on their agenda that they would prefer civil servants to be close to Ministers rather than providing a distinct perspective on investment in Sheffield.

The water-cooler conversations at BIS must be pretty good, because this decision is so at odds with the supposed direction of travel across Government. The estates report mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central not only found that the cost of space per individual is in Croydon a tenth of what it is in Whitehall, but that the cost of each individual is about 27% higher in London than in other areas of the country, and that the previous Labour Government saved around £2 billion by moving 20,000 civil servants out of London.

Six years after the Smith report said that ministerial behaviour was crucial in overcoming what it termed the “London magnet” and relocating Whitehall, we now have a BIS Secretary doing the exact opposite. The report, which was published just before Labour left power, had at its heart a direction of travel that would move civil servants out of Whitehall to bring the Government closer to the people and stimulate economic vibrancy.

Senior officials categorically admitted to Sheffield employees that they did not even think about the effect on the local economy when they were making their decision, an oversight that flies in the face of years of Government policy, in which the move to cities and regions outside London was supposed to be a standard-bearer for businesses to follow. If the Minister thinks that the author of that report, Ian Smith, was not talking about types of policy roles such as those in Sheffield, he is wrong. In fact, Mr Smith argued that “power and career opportunities will only truly move out of London when significant parts of the core policy departments are moved.”

Senior BIS officials must have great hopes for the benefits of these water-cooler conversations if they are to override the clear direction of travel of Government; if they outweigh the huge costs, not only per individual employee but of the loss of historic knowledge and perspective in Sheffield; and if they outweigh the terrible message that this sends about concentrating power in London to businesses hoping to locate to a region that BIS is supposed to be helping to grow.

I imagine that even the Minister agrees that the business justification for the Sheffield closure is flimsy, so I want now to turn to why it is so important that we do not lose these jobs in Sheffield. In the near six weeks
since the decision was announced there has been no acceptance of the unique position of this northern policy centre. The Sheffield BIS office is unique. It is part of the headquarters—the only office outside London carrying out the high-level policy functions that civil servants in Whitehall also carry-out, such as analysis of evidence, project management and stakeholder engagement.

In trying to justify the decision, the BIS Secretary was adamant that his plan will continue the existing arrangement where more of his civil servants will be outside of London than inside. I am sorry to say that he either does not get it or is being disingenuous. The description of his Department in an internal advert tells the truth. It says:

“the vast majority of the 2,300 directly employed staff at the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills are based in London”.

That was written before the Sheffield closure was announced. The vast majority—96.7%, as I discovered in a recent parliamentary question—of the Department’s senior civil servants are based in London, as are almost all of the core BIS office staff. If you think I am leaping to—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I call Deirdre Brock.

3.10 pm

Deirdre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. Please excuse my voice. I hope hon. Members can hear what I am saying.

I have to admit that I was surprised when it was revealed at the end of last month that Sheffield is too far north to be part of the northern powerhouse. It struck me that Private Eye might know something about it being grim up north London—about the hardship, the economic disadvantage that sometimes seem overwhelming and the deprivation, compared with the easy street life in Yorkshire. What Government could stand idly by and see such inequality last? There was apparently no choice but to move jobs to compensate, so the northern powerhouse is powering south, like so much else in the UK, and being sucked into the black hole that is London.

This decision, we are told, is part of a move to streamline services, centralise staff at BIS and ensure that Ministers have easy access to the knowledge and skills of staff. Is there some difficulty with the internet reaching Sheffield, I wonder? Ministers cannot be uniquely unable to use email and other electronic communication. I bet there are enough people already in London who would be willing to give them the benefit of their personal wisdom.

If this is about cost-cutting, I really cannot understand why staff are being moved somewhere where they have to be paid the London weighting and where office space is ridiculously overpriced. Surely the sensible thing to do would be to close the expensive offices in London and centralise the staff in Sheffield, Doncaster, Leeds, York or indeed anywhere outside the south-east of England—especially, for goodness’ sake, when they are working on the northern powerhouse. That might make sense.

While we are on the subject of north and south, I hope I will be excused a little detour to point out that the northern powerhouse is not very northern. It is quite a bit south of my constituency, a heck of a distance south of Caithness and Sutherland, and nowhere near Shetland. In fact, Sheffield is three times further away from Inverness than it is from London. It is 140 miles to the capital of the south-east and 409 miles to the capital of the highlands—and that is if there are no diversions. We will keep in mind that it is the northern England powerhouse and forgive the oversight.

The suction that continues to take jobs south needs to be addressed urgently. About one fifth of all civil servants are based in London, according to the Library’s ‘Civil Service statistics’ briefing paper, and another 10% are in the south-east of England. Even Scotland, which runs a whole lot of parallel systems to the UK civil service, has only 10% of the overall headcount. Scotland, of course, is very efficient, but it is clear that there is no great spread of civil service employment. Despite the rhetoric about moving civil service jobs out of London from the Government and, to be fair, their predecessors, the jobs have stayed in London—even those that should be elsewhere—and some are actually moving back to London.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills might be too costly to run, too complicated, inefficient and possibly even unfit for purpose, but centralising it in London cannot be the answer. If the Mayor of London is correct and London is a thriving, innovative city, bursting at the seams with businesses hungry for skilful people to work in them, surely it would simply be better for BIS to get out of the way and let them get on with it. If he is wrong and London is struggling to attract businesses, Government Departments should get out of the way to reduce pressure on office rental prices. Either way, Sheffield is surely a better call than London for a Government office.

Of course, this is what the Mayor of London actually thinks:

“the success of this city cannot be taken for granted: the jam from London must not be spread too thinly over the dry Ryvita of the regions.”

That kind of whiff-whaff helps no one. The truth is that sucking public spending into London while the rest of the UK bites down hard on austerity is damaging for every community on these islands. Superheating the London economy does not help ordinary Londoners, who are being pushed out of their own city by living costs and who see their communities destroyed to provide for affluent incomers. Pulling civil service jobs into the south-east of England does not help young professionals who are trying to get ahead and make something of their lives. There is no policy imperative or cost consideration that requires them to be sent to London, and no public good that would be fulfilled. There is no real reason at all for their being in London.

There is time and space for the decision to be reconsidered and for those staff to be located somewhere far more suited to the job they will be doing, as many Members said. Ministers have a chance to do something sensible for a change. There is time to change tack and to do something useful. Instead of running Sheffield down, build it up. Increase the staff there, give the office a boost, give Sheffield a boost with it and give London a break.
Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to voice my dismay at this decision. I thank the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) for securing this debate.

As the Minister knows very well, I am the last person to object automatically to decisions relating to savings in public spending. In fact, I spent half a decade defending decisions for which many hon. Members developed a political cottage industry of blaming me personally—[Interruption.] They nod as sanctimoniously now as they condemned me then. That’s history, as we say, but that gives me a certain credibility when I claim that I look at this decision with a degree of objectivity. The political subjectivity, of course, comes from the fact that a number of my constituents in south-west Sheffield have been directly affected by it.

All of this stems from the BIS departmental settlement with the Treasury in the spending review in late November 2015. That is the origin of the decision. I want to dwell on why the decision was made in the way that it was, why the Treasury delivered cuts to BIS on such a scale, and why they cascaded down to have such a disastrous effect on Sheffield and the many dozens of BIS employees in the Sheffield office.

I thought to myself, “Perhaps it is because the new Government decided to protect more non-BIS Departments in Whitehall.” In other words, perhaps the knock-on effect—the budgetary pressure—on BIS is more remorseless than it was during the five years in which I was Deputy Prime Minister. During that time, we fought to defend a number of BIS programmes, notwithstanding a number of very controversial BIS financial savings. Actually, on closer scrutiny, I found that, far from there being additional protections, some of the protections have been relaxed. For instance, under the coalition Government, and at my personal insistence, schools spending was protected in real terms. It is now not protected in real terms under this Government. There is no wider Whitehall reason why the knock-on effect on the BIS budget should be so much greater than it was in the past.

Then I thought to myself, “Perhaps, to be very fair, this difficult decision can be justified if savings are made”—although I very much tend to agree with what was said earlier. I find it difficult to see any significant material savings from this decision, but let us give the Government the benefit of the doubt. If there are savings, perhaps they are being channelled elsewhere to protect some of the other important BIS initiatives and projects. But no, I discovered that it is part of a much wider cut. In the wider context of the other things that have been scrapped—the Business Growth Service, the Manufacturing Advice Service and the growth accelerator programme—it is more, rather than less, inexplicable. In other words, the savings in that area of the BIS budget are not being recycled to protect other areas.

I looked at the figures, which are, as ever—now that I no longer have the excellent help of legions of civil servants—quite difficult to get hold of. The figures that I was able to get hold of from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the House of Commons Library show something very revealing indeed. Under the Government of 2010 to 2015, the reductions in the BIS budget, when compared with other Whitehall Departments, put it about mid-table. Some Departments had more generous settlements and roughly the same number had more reductions. The reduction, which was very significant and led, for instance, to some of those agonising decisions on higher education spending, was just over 18%, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. In cash terms it was well below a £4 billion saving.

In the latest league table showing where, in the Whitehall jungle, money has been saved in the greatest amounts following the Chancellor’s announcement in late November, BIS leaps from mid-table to the position of having the second-largest cut. The cut of 18% under the previous Government has shot up to 26%, well over £4 billion. My central assertion is that that is a choice—not an inescapable guillotine. Perhaps I may say gently but firmly to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who has done a great job of highlighting the injustice of the decision, that he was very unfair to point the finger at the permanent secretary. The decision was a political choice by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, who was keen to be top of the class in the Chancellor’s Whitehall fan club by delivering the earliest and biggest savings—in my view, excessive savings—to the Treasury when, as I found out over five years, Whitehall Departments are asked, as in a game of pass-the-parcel, to make savings.

That is why I ask the Minister to confirm that the genesis of what is happening was a political decision—not by him but by the Secretary of State—to do more than his duty to the Chancellor, and to deliver such big cuts from BIS that it shot from the middle to second from top of the Whitehall table. The decision was unnecessary and did great damage to a number of other important BIS programmes. It is now doing considerable damage to the livelihoods, families and fortunes of hundreds of people in Sheffield and South Yorkshire.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on obtaining the debate, and indeed my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who did an excellent and thorough job of taking on the paucity of the Government’s thinking on and explanation of the decision, and their business case. In passing I would point out to the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) that the key point my hon. Friend was making was that we have not had an explanation showing any savings. We do not know that that is what has driven the decision, and it would be helpful if the Minister would explain. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for obtaining an urgent question straight after the announcement. That was excellent, although from what I understand we do not seem to have made much progress since then.

The decision is about real people, who have lost their jobs. Darren Shepherd and his colleague Alison came to my surgery on Saturday because they are going to lose their jobs, and they are worried. They are frightened for their families’ future. They said to me, “Why is this happening, Mr Betts? Can you tell us why?” I said, “Well, I’m sorry, I can’t. I know what they have told me.” That is not an adequate position to put people in when they work hard for the Government and the country, doing a variety of jobs. They do not know why and no
one can explain it to them. That is the fundamental question that we are asking today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central said, it is of benefit to the civil service to have a wider pool from which to draw talent, and it is beneficial to the Government, the people doing the jobs, and the city of Sheffield. The Government will have to work hard to convince us on any of those counts that it was the correct decision to take those jobs from Sheffield and move them to London.

I do not want to say more about the particulars of the staff and their situation, or about the diminishing of the wider pool of talent, although I look forward to the Minister’s reply on those points. I want to make a few points about the Government’s commitment to devolution. I am the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, which has just produced a report on devolution. We unanimously said:

“We strongly support the principle of devolution. We welcome the fact that, at the start of this new Parliament, it occupies such a prominent position on the Government’s agenda.”

I agree with that. It is not a party political issue but a commitment to devolution. I welcome the Government’s move in that direction. We also said:

“The Devolution Bill is just one part of enabling devolution. There also needs to be an enthusiasm for it across all Government Departments and a commitment to it as the ‘default position’”

and we “would like to see a culture of devolution embedded in all Government Departments”,

an annual report about what Departments do, and an opportunity for local authorities to report back on the Government’s commitment to devolution and rate their experience of different Departments. I do not think BIS will get many stars from Sheffield City Council in the devolution report.

If we are to have devolution in what is the most centralised country in western Europe, it cannot be left to the Department for Communities and Local Government to do very good deals with councils, including those in the Sheffield city region; the whole of Government must be signed up for it. Therefore, what we are talking about is not just a matter of substance in relation to BIS and its operation, and people’s jobs, important though those are—and I will fight hard for my constituents involved in the process—it is also symbolic of the whole Government and their attitude towards devolution. Is devolution a matter of a few deals with local government, or is it a matter of Government policy to which the whole Government, including BIS, is signed up? If it is about a balance and a few pounds of cost difference here or there, or the slightly greater inconvenience for Ministers of getting on the phone or using a video link, the balance must come down in favour of the jobs in Sheffield, as a fundamental indication that the Government are committed to devolution, to pushing powers out to the regions, and at least to keeping the jobs that already exist there.

The term “northern powerhouse” is bandied around. It started with the Chancellor, but many Ministers and MPs now use it. The fundamental question is whether it is just a catchphrase or real policy—empty words or substance. I look forward to the Minister convincing me in due course.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the Front-Bench speakers, I ask them to bear in mind that I hope there will be time at the end for the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) to conclude the debate.

3.27 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am grateful to be speaking under your chairmanship today, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on making the debate possible, and commend him for defending his constituents’ right to be heard on a matter that I know is important for the great steel city’s community. I do not know whether the Minister or even the permanent secretary recognise this thing called an iPad. FaceTime works. I use it every day in my constituency work, and I am sure that senior civil servants and Ministers could do the same.

I am disappointed that the Secretary of State is not here. I read the urgent statement that was demanded by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh)—I congratulate her on that—and thought that if it was not so serious it would be a good laugh. It was extraordinary, and I commend the hon. Lady for making sure the statement happened.

I have a long family connection to Sheffield, and over many decades I have seen the rise and fall of British Government policy in the city, as Governments have sought to deal with the aftermath of deindustrialisation while maintaining the quintessentially British Government policy that I would title “South, south, south.” Not long ago in the Chamber the Government extolled the virtues of devolution and decentralisation to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but they fail to recognise, or perchance they ignore, the elephant in their English garden—the culture of London centralisation. Yet in “UK Cities Monitor 2008” the north’s cities, including Sheffield, were among the top 10 for locating a business, and in third and fourth places for office location. The same report placed Sheffield third for “greenest reputation” and second for availability of financial incentives. I might move there myself. What is not to like about London, the capital of oligarchs and Russian tycoons, offers nothing but the London weighting, which could not buy someone a rabbit hutch, and the prospect of amute commute more akin to “1984”. There is the opportunity to base a civil service Department in one of the UK’s friendliest cities and to obtain all the social and economic benefits that that would bring to the entire islands.

I have no doubt about the personal commitment of the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), to her political ideology or, for that matter, about her knowledge of Sheffield itself, given her local connections—it is a pity she is not here today—but I do question the political ideology that is driving this process. While cities such as Sheffield offer new, innovative approaches to growth outside the hothouse of London, offering civil servants the opportunity to move to London or, even worse, to commute from Sheffield is both unproductive in the long term and a socially and economically bankrupt approach. If a civil servant decides to up sticks, either as a single person or with a spouse, partner or family, the policy will generate a burden on London’s already overcrowded public services as well as shrinking the affordable housing market.
Having read the response to the urgent question on 29 January, I am mindful of the point made by the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden), which I will quickly quote:

“It is also a huge worry…to the 12 other BIS regional offices, six of which are in the north.”

I take that to mean the north of England—

“That they are at risk from this so-called restructuring.”—[Official Report, 29 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 559-60.]

I call that restructuring policy the London dividend. Like the hon. Member for Blackpool South, I call upon the Minister to set out unambiguously and openly the Government’s approach to that restructuring. Will the Minister here today commit to a restructuring programme that does not drive civil service jobs from the great cultural counties of northern England to the bursting metropolis of London? If that is the policy, then, like those that were once thrown at Scotland, it will undermine community cohesion, erode civic pride and limit both opportunity and resources for cities such as Sheffield. Such cities continue to be undermined by the reality that, according to the Institute for Government, the proportion of civil service jobs in London increased from 16% in 2010 to 18% by March 2015, when there were already 80,000 such jobs in the capital.

It is critical that the Government use their powers to bring about the inclusive growth that the Scottish Government, even with its limited economic powers, have achieved. Scotland has developed a more egalitarian model, which was praised by Professor Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel prize-winning economist, when he said:

“Tackling inequality is the foremost challenge that many governments face. Scotland’s Economic Strategy leads the way in identifying the challenges and provides a strong vision for change.”

Data from 2012-13 show that income inequality is lower in Scotland, and the gender gap in employment in Scotland has also narrowed, but this will not help the northern powerhouse, or even the city of Sheffield, to deal with so many of those matters. The British Government’s approach to growth, as seen in this debate, is short-sighted, limited and exclusionary. It fails to see the tangible assets of its great historic northern counties or the communities who choose to live there.

In finishing, I commend those communities, who, through it all, are resolute and determined to be heard in this place. I would encourage their elected representatives, who I also commend today, not to look south to London for policy answers. I say to them: I challenge you, in meeting the needs of your communities, to turn and look even further north, and consider that inclusive model which I would consider could assist you in seeing off this Government’s ideological drive to limit your cities’ and counties’ ability to be that northern powerhouse; and I challenge you to ensure that the civil service, with all due respect, is representative of the communities that it seeks to serve.

3.34 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on securing this important debate and pay tribute to all my hon. Friends from across the region, who have worked so hard on their constituents’ behalf to hold the Government to account for their perverse decision.

The announcement by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on 28 January 2016 to close its largest office outside London and transfer staff to London was understandably greeted with shock. My hon. Friends have highlighted the effect it has had on people and their jobs. The announcement came out of the blue. It is confused and short-sighted at best and destructive at worst. Put simply, it makes no sense, economically or otherwise, and the Opposition are calling for the Government to review it. It is bad news for the people of Sheffield and for the civil service, because of the loss of experienced staff and their valuable institutional knowledge. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), it is also bad for the diversity of the civil service. Indeed, Sir Jeremy Heywood’s comment is germane here:

“talent is everywhere but opportunity is not”.

The move is also bad for the economy of the region. It will divert money from the local economy, further damaging jobs and incomes in Yorkshire. What does that tell us about the Chancellor’s rhetoric about the need to create a northern powerhouse and the importance of regional growth to rebalance the economy? It tells us that it is just rhetoric. This is really about the greater centralisation of power in London, which will create an even bigger gulf between the regions. As a proud northerner, born and bred, I can tell the Minister that that gulf exists. I feel no particular affinity towards London, but I do towards Sheffield, Rotherham and Edinburgh—the cities of the north—because they are where common-sense decisions are often made. If the Government are serious about the northern economy, they should stop moving civil service jobs to London and start providing proper support instead of empty promises. London is overheating and house prices are becoming increasingly unaffordable to ordinary people. The north needs jobs and has the talent to fill them.

The BIS permanent secretary said that the plan to create a combined central headquarters and policy centre in London is about modernising how the Department works, making it more flexible and reducing operating costs. He also claimed that the closure was part of a programme to reduce the Department’s operating costs and staff size by 2020. He said:

“Our operating model needs to be designed in a way that works for this smaller workforce with more streamlined structures.”

I will not even mention the quote about the telephone system and computers not working in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills; I think that was effectively debunked by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh).

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), agreed with the permanent secretary, saying that the closure of the Sheffield office is part of the plan to deliver efficiency savings and contribute to the Government’s deficit reduction target—another blow for the north. However, there appears to be no evidence for any cost saving, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central. How can transferring the work of the office to London, a significantly more expensive location than Sheffield, lead to a reduction in operating costs?
I want to pay tribute at this point to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central, in whose constituency the office is located and who has been at the forefront of the campaign to find any convincing rationale for the move. As he pointed out, nothing approaching a business case has been made for the move. The permanent secretary admitted that when he was questioned by the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee on being probed about whether there had been any cost-benefit analysis of the move from Sheffield, he replied: “We did not do disaggregated business cases for each of the 80 offices we now have.”

He went on to say that there was not even a copy of the board paper that initially proposed the move.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Is it not also shocking that the trade unions were not advised prior to the announcement? What does that say about the Government’s approach to industrial relations? What does it say to the people of Sheffield, who are also seeing other proposed office closures, such as at Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs?

Yvonne Fovargue: It is symptomatic of the Government’s approach to trade union relations that they feel that the unions are so irrelevant they can be ignored and their power reduced. Many other offices throughout the country are indeed closing, such as the HMRC offices in Merseyside, with a loss of jobs and talent.

In addition, the permanent secretary said: “I don’t think I can point you to one specific document which covers specifically the Sheffield issue”. So, 249 people losing their jobs was not covered even by one specific document. That is appalling. Those are weasel words: there is no business case for Sheffield to be closed. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central has tabled written questions to the Secretary of State and written to the Prime Minister asking for the business case to be published. It is still not in the public domain.

I suspect that the real reason for the move is not to save money, but simply a desire to have officials closer to Ministers in London. The phrase used by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, “water-cooler conversations”, is appropriate here—as she said, they must be pretty good conversations to cost that amount of money. The right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) believes this is a political decision that has come from the top; other people believe it is a decision of the civil servants. We have no documents; we do not know.

The civil service has become increasingly centralised since 2010. As we have heard, the proportion of civil service jobs based in London has increased from 16% in 2010 to 18% in 2015, when 80,000 civil servants were based in the capital. The decision to close the Sheffield office is completely unacceptable. It has not been properly thought through and it has not been explained to the people most affected—those losing their jobs—or the people who represent them, their Members of Parliament. The decision seems to be based purely on a whim, and I certainly cannot believe that it will save money. In my view, the Government have to come clean on why they are moving these 247 jobs. It is complete nonsense to move jobs to London, where salaries and office rents are higher. Nobody can see how it makes any sense at all. Public money paid for the 2020 report and we have a right to see it.

Too many decisions are made by people living, working and bringing up children in London, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley. Too many decisions are made by people who have never been outside the capital and they do not draw on the varied experiences of other people from around the regions, who have a totally different experience of life. Policy needs to be developed by people with differing experiences, and the majority of people do not live in London. Will the Minister commit today to reviewing the decision in the light of what he has heard, or will the Government forge ahead and close the Sheffield office, delivering yet another blow to one of the great cities in the north?

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on securing this important debate, the second on the subject in recent weeks. I commend all right hon. and hon. Members for being present in the Chamber. As right hon. and hon. Members are aware, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is committed to delivering efficiency savings and to contributing to the Government’s overall deficit reduction target to clear the deficit by 2019-20. To achieve that, we developed the “BIS 2020” programme to modernise how the Department works.

Paul Blomfield: I apologise if I am intervening prematurely—the Minister might be about to tell us this—but will he explain for the first time how much money will be saved by moving 247 jobs from Sheffield to London? It is a simple question.

Joseph Johnson: I will come to savings shortly, so if the hon. Gentleman bears with me for a few seconds, I will get to his question.

The BIS programme will reduce operating costs by 30% to 40% and deliver a simpler, smaller Department that is more flexible in delivery and more responsive to stakeholders. As part of those plans, as right hon. and hon. Members know, the Department has announced its intention to close the BIS office at St Paul’s Place in Sheffield by January 2018. Such decisions are never taken lightly, and providing the right support for and communications with staff has been a priority for the permanent secretary and the entire senior team of the Department. All staff and departmental trade unions were informed of the decision on 28 January and the statutory 90-day consultation process began shortly afterwards. All staff affected by the decision have been fully briefed.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who is no longer in her place, asked what support had been made available to affected staff. I will give the House some detail on that important matter. We are providing comprehensive support to all those facing a potential change or loss of job, including: professional, external careers advice; professional outplacement support;
a jobs fair in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions; time out of the office for job-search activities; and financial advice workshops. In addition, we are exploring all routes to avoid compulsory redundancies, including voluntary exit schemes. There will be no compulsory redundancies before May 2017 as a result of the proposed closure of the Sheffield site.

Many staff will be listening to the debate or watching it on television. The BIS senior leadership wants to ensure that the package of support is comprehensive. If there are things that the Department could be doing, or ways in which we could enhance the support I have outlined, we want to know about it. We want the staff affected to let us know what more the Department can do to support them at this time. We have set up a dedicated email address for them to use, and they have already used the system to make valuable suggestions about ways in which we can enhance the support available. We have been asked by the staff to ensure that updates are regular and frequent. We will be ensuring that that happens. We have already established a dedicated section on the Department’s intranet which includes a comprehensive overview of all “BIS 2020”-related matters. We have set out exactly when our Department’s senior leadership team will be in Sheffield, so that affected staff may discuss their concerns directly.

**Chris Stephens:** The Minister has talked about consultation with staff. Will he tell us, first, how many meetings there have been with the trade unions affected? Secondly, will he outline how a responsive Department can be responsive when it closes offices, leading to a lack of local knowledge and no understanding of local areas?

**Joseph Johnson:** I will happily touch on part of that question. We are now in the 90-day consultation period. The consultation is on a range of issues, including the future of the staff in Sheffield, so—in response to an earlier question from Opposition Members—the future of staff in the city is only one of the issues being consulted upon. Legally, we may confirm the decision on closure before the end of the consultation, but I am happy to confirm that we will wait until the end of the full 90-day period before making a final decision. In response to the hon. Gentleman’s specific question, we have had regular meetings with trade union officials. To continue, the Department needed to be restructured in line with its new business model under the “BIS 2020” framework. In answer to the question from the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), that will deliver savings of £350 million by 2020, of which approximately £100 million will fall in the administration budgets.

**Paul Blomfield:** With the greatest respect, the Minister did not answer my question. I presume that the matter has been looked at in considerable detail, because I am sure that no such decision would be made in any less responsible way. My question was: how much money is saved specifically by moving 247 policy jobs from Sheffield to London?

**Joseph Johnson:** I would fall back on the response that the permanent secretary gave to the Select Committee on that point: it is difficult to disaggregate a specific item in an overall programme change. The overall “BIS 2020” programme is an holistic system change of working for the Department that will deliver savings of 30% to 40%, worth £350 million overall.

**Mr Betts:** May I ask the question a different way around? If the Department pursued its restructuring and the “BIS 2020” programme, but left the jobs in Sheffield, how much more would that cost the Department?

**Joseph Johnson:** Again, I am unable to provide a disaggregated breakdown of that figure because we are talking about a system change. We must bear in mind that the Department’s current locations are legacy locations, which are the result of legacy decisions and ad hoc organisational changes over a long period of time. We are moving to a more system-based way of looking at all the various ways in which the Department works. In future, our structures need to be, and will be, designed in a more streamlined and efficient way.

To support that effort, we will be bringing down the number of locations from which we operate from about 80 to approximately seven centres of excellence, supported by a regional footprint for work at a local level. Each centre will focus on a key business activity and bring together expertise and help to build up capability. That does not mean a London-centric Department, as has been suggested by Members. Even with the movement of policy roles to London, our overall London footprint will decrease by 2020. We have, and will continue to have, many more people based outside than inside London.

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is being generous. The point we were making was exactly that the Sheffield BIS office is not like other local and regional offices throughout the country; they are the only headquarters outside London where policy decision making is done. Does he not accept that this closure is a serious blow to the Government’s northern powerhouse and to devolution, which exposes that all as empty rhetoric?

**Joseph Johnson:** Clearly I disagree with that. We will not be losing the capabilities. We will be moving a number of the jobs, and some jobs will become available in London, so the policy expertise that resides in Sheffield at present will not be lost.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Central asked about equality. BIS is recognised across Whitehall as a leader in its support and determination to embed diversity across the Department’s workforce, and that will continue to be the case in the years ahead, notwithstanding these changes. The Department employs about 18,000 staff outside of London and just over 2,000 are based in the No. 1 Victoria Street headquarters in London.

**Paul Blomfield:** Will the Minister give way on that point?

**Joseph Johnson:** I will make a bit of progress, if I may.

We are certain that that footprint, and our BIS local capability in particular, will ensure that BIS will maintain a nationwide perspective on policy issues. The hon. Gentleman who just tried to intervene—I am responding to his earlier intervention—was concerned about our ability to maintain policy capability in the light of the expertise that resides in Sheffield. As I said, there will be opportunities for people from Sheffield to move to
London and other places, and we are confident that we will be able to maintain the high quality of work in the higher education and other policy directorates.

As the Minister for Universities and Science, since last May I have been working closely with higher education officials in Sheffield, and I am very happy with the work that they have done. They have consistently provided excellent support, and I want to thank them very much for their work. I reiterate that the Department’s decision was not taken lightly, but I am confident that our higher education policy making capability will remain as strong as ever.

In response to the points made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on the northern powerhouse, the Government are completely committed to Sheffield and its surrounding area as part of the northern powerhouse. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, along with the Department for Communities and Local Government, has been working closely with the local council and the local enterprise partnership to produce an enhanced, landmark devolution deal, which will see a Sheffield city region mayor elected for the first time next year by voters across South Yorkshire. The mayor will have transport budgets, franchised bus services and strategic planning, plus additional devolved powers for the area’s combined authority. The mayor will also get control of an investment fund worth £30 million a year for 30 years.

Mr Clegg: I have a really friendly suggestion for how the Minister can honour the stirring rhetoric about the Government’s commitment to the northern powerhouse and to the long-term vibrancy of the Sheffield economy in particular. Will he undertake to all of us here now that he will personally make representations to the Secretary of State for Transport, the Chancellor and, if necessary, the Prime Minister to locate the high-speed railway station due to be located in South Yorkshire in—

Kevin Barron: Meadowhall.

Mr Clegg—no, not in Meadowhall, but in Sheffield city centre? The northern powerhouse is built around the vibrancy of city centres. Ignore the cacophony of different voices from the Labour party in South Yorkshire and locate the station there and, not all, but quite a lot will be forgiven.

Joseph Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising an important point about the new transport connections that will improve the competitiveness of businesses in the north of England and the northern powerhouse area. That highlights the important point that, first of all, the northern powerhouse is about stimulating private sector growth, jobs and economic activity. It is not about preserving in aspic exactly the way things are across the whole of the state and the public sector—that is not what the northern powerhouse is about as an idea. It is about building better transport links, for instance through the creation of the Transport for the North body, and investing in things such as our science base, which we are now able to do thanks to the great science settlement we got in the spending review, which will help great institutions such as the Sir Henry Royce Institute, the Institute for Ageing in Newcastle and the National Graphene Institute in Manchester, which have all been able to come into existence in the north and help to drive productivity up in the area.

Mr Betts: The northern powerhouse is about private investment, and that is important, but so is the symbol that the Government give about their commitment. We cannot get precise figures about the savings for the Department in moving these staff, but does the Minister agree that his permanent secretary could scope out an alternative model of how the Government would operate—with all the changes and the policy streams, but with staff remaining in Sheffield—to see what the difference is, and would he publish that, so that we can have an open and transparent consultation?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. There is great strength of feeling here. I hope the Minister will leave time for the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron).

Joseph Johnson: Thank you, Mr Howarth. I want to address this false picture—[HON. MEMBERS: “Answer the question!”]—that is being presented of jobs being sucked into the economy in the south. The north of England is one of the fastest-growing regions of the country in terms of jobs growth and employment. The north-east and north-west are seeing very strong employment growth. We are confident that our long-term economic plan will continue to deliver jobs and opportunities for all the people in the area.

This has obviously been a very difficult decision for the Department. We are listening closely to staff to see how we can improve the support available to them and we will be listening closely to them in the weeks and months ahead. I will leave time for the right hon. Member for Rother Valley to conclude.

3.57 pm

Kevin Barron: First of all, may I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate? It has been fascinating. I will quickly nip through one or two things that have been said. I did not know about the problems we have with phones in Sheffield—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said that the workforce had been told that. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) again: we do have the internet in Sheffield and South Yorkshire, and it does tend to work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) said, modern IT is a way to brief Ministers as well. Let me relate a little to that: iPads do work, as well as the Scottish National party. I did an interview live on Radio Sheffield at twenty past eight this morning, sat in my lounge, in a house in West Yorkshire, using a landline. I said to the interviewer at the time, “Twenty years ago I would have had to have got on the bus, gone into the studio and sat in Millbank to have the interview,” because they could not have coped with what are now everyday things. The idea that we are concerned about phone lines and everything else is just a little too much.

I was interested by the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg). This is a political decision in the end and we have to accept that. I was here yesterday afternoon when we were talking about pharmacies. The Government decided to cut £170 million from pharmacies as part of the national health service’s £22 billion of efficiency savings, and today they tell us that they will put £10 billion back. If someone took £22 from me and gave me £10 back, I would think I had lost and I would not be happy with that.
I recognise that we do not have much time, but may I say this to the Minister? He says that the decision has not been taken lightly, but from the interaction we have had here, I can say that it has been taken without much knowledge of what the Department wants to do, and if I were a member of the workforce, I would not be very happy to have that fait accompli put in front of me. I still think there is time to reconsider the decision and I hope that the Government will do so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the closure of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills office in Sheffield.
payments show that people in more affluent areas are less likely to require disability-related support. In the Prime Minister's constituency of Witney, 405 people received PIP in October 2015. In Chingford and Woodford Green, represented by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, 495 claimants were paid PIP, while 680 constituents of the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People received that support. Take as a contrast my constituency of Glasgow East, where in October 2015 1,806 people received personal independence payments. It is astonishing that my constituents are a staggering four and a half times more likely than the Prime Minister's to be in receipt of crucial disability-related support.

Too often at my surgeries and around my constituency, I meet people whose experience of poverty has contributed to or exacerbated their disability and whose financial security is threatened every month by disability-related costs. Despite plenty of evidence that this is a deep-rooted structural issue, we have so far failed to assert the sharp focus that is so desperately required to build sustained progress for disabled people and remove the links between disability and poverty. Our collective failure to do so is harming families across the country.

Today in the UK, a third of people in poverty live in a household with at least one disabled person. One in three children in Scotland who live with a disabled adult live in poverty, compared with one in five children living in poverty who do not live with a disabled adult. Disabled people can face increased cost pressures, and families with a disabled member face disproportionately a serious social gradient.

Research for the organisation Parenting across Scotland has found that families living with disability find it even more difficult to make ends meet, with 54% of parents in Scotland with a disability finding it more difficult to pay the bills than a year ago, compared with 29% of non-disabled parents. Some 25% of disabled parents in Scotland report problems getting affordable credit, compared with 8% of non-disabled parents. Meanwhile, 26% of disabled parents were being paid less than the real living wage, compared with 10% of non-disabled parents. It is clear that families living with disability are disproportionately and unacceptably bearing the brunt of the economic inequality that increasingly defines our society.

Wealthy families in Britain are a third less likely to have a disabled child—a statistic that reveals an alarming social gradient, because those families are pushed further into poverty by the pressures of caring for those children. People with disabilities and impairments are some of the poorest and most marginalised in the country. Academics at the University of Warwick’s School of Health and Social Studies published a paper in *BMC Pediatrics* showing that families bringing up a disabled child are at least £50 a week worse off than those without.

A family bringing up a child with a disability will face 18% higher costs in their family budget. That is because, for example, a disabled baby needs more nappies. A family’s ability to work and find affordable childcare is a real burden. Households with disabled children will depend more on social security benefits and face the additional financial costs associated with caring for a disabled child. Fuel costs for specially adapted cars are often higher than average, and the fact that those with the most severe disabilities have to attend hospitals and clinics weekly or even daily for therapies and treatments can have an enormous impact on family budgets.

Extra energy costs are also incurred because homes often have to be kept warmer in order to protect people with disabilities from colds and bugs, to which they are especially vulnerable. Disabled children living in poverty are often housebound due to the nature of their condition, and for those with the most severe disabilities, a warm home can truly mean the difference between life and death.

If we are ever to break the poverty-disability link, we need a long-term plan to tackle deprivation, lift communities out of poverty and ensure a decent standard of living for every single person in our country. While the UK Government’s policies are sadly taking us in the wrong direction in that respect, I know there are Members on all sides of the House who agree we need to do more to ensure a better quality of life for disabled people across the UK.

Of course, this issue affects a great many people not only in this country but in every corner of the world, and there is an important international dimension to the debate. Globally, one in seven people have a disability, and 80% of disabled people around the world live in poverty. In the developing world, we see the same reciprocal relationship between poverty and disability, only with even more striking effects. In a great many countries, people living in poverty simply do not have adequate access to the healthcare, clean water and sanitation that we in the UK take for granted. As a result, they are even more vulnerable to malnutrition and disease. They are also more likely to live and work in dangerous or disaster-prone areas, all of which means that poor people in the developing world are more likely to acquire an impairment that leads to disability.

Disabled people in the developing world, as is the case here, can also too often find themselves excluded from healthcare, education, employment and opportunities to participate in their communities, meaning that those living with disabilities often constitute the poorest people in the poorest countries on earth. The Government’s international development agenda has recognised the specific need to assist disabled people, but non-governmental organisations and charities, such as CBM UK, are telling us that more needs to be done by the Department for International Development.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Roger, for chairing this debate. Does the hon. Lady agree that, in the light of the sustainable development goals, which are accepted and have been adopted by 170 nations in the world—Britain is a signatory—the Minister should agree to provide support to those families and particularly disabled people so that they can have a better standard of living?

Natalie McGarry: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for succinctly making that point, and I completely agree with him.

As we know, people with disabilities are most at risk in conflict situations, meaning that our diplomatic and humanitarian response is vital in supporting disabled people. One in five refugees in Jordan and Lebanon is affected by physical, sensory or intellectual impairment—a chilling illustration of the cost of the warfare raging in Syria today.

Internationally, the UK must champion diplomatic solutions that will help to end conflict, alleviate poverty and support disabled people in some of the most desperate
places on earth. At the world humanitarian summit in May in Istanbul, DFID’s representatives must highlight the importance of the inclusion of disabled people as a core element of an effective humanitarian response.

However, there is so much more to do here in the UK to break the poverty-disability link as well, and although the lives of disabled people in conflict zones and the developing world can only be transformed through international co-operation on development and humanitarian assistance, here in the UK, we in this place have the primary responsibility to improve the lives of people living with disabilities. As a starting point at least, we need to make sure that people and families living with disability have the financial support that they need to get by without the fear of a life lived in poverty. We have a serious responsibility to invest more in a system of social protection that meets disabled people’s needs and tackles the pernicious inequalities that they face.

Of course, that is not in keeping with the current direction of political travel in this place. It is hard to escape the fact that the UK Government’s austerity agenda is immeasurably harming the finances of disabled people in the UK, pushing many more into poverty and making difficult lives even harder. The introduction of universal credit is hitting families with disability particularly hard, as those previously claiming the middle or higher rate of the care component of disability living allowance will no longer receive the severe disability premium.

In Scotland, 80% of households hit by the bedroom tax include at least one disabled person. Changes to incapacity benefit have cost householders on average £3,480 a year and changes to disability living allowance have cost people £3,000 a year. In England, according to estimates from the Centre for Welfare Reform, cuts to welfare, social care and other services mean that disabled people are facing an average cumulative cut of £4,600 a year.

It is simply not acceptable that disabled people are being treated as fair game for the Government’s austerity agenda and yet, further cuts to the employment and support allowance work-related activity group went through Parliament yesterday. That will further disincentivise work for people with disabilities and push thousands more people with long-term illnesses and disabilities into financial hardship.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): One of my constituents who experiences disability is unable to read some of the information that is required to make her personal independence payment application and, as a result, relies on the citizens advice bureau to support her. Does the Minister accept that some people require additional support to make their applications, and acknowledge that, rather than penalising people such as my constituent, they need assistance to live independently and make their way in the world?

Natalie McGarry: I thank my hon. Friend for making that hugely important point. In my constituency, I have also seen the lack of access to readable documents and support, particularly for people with mental health issues as well as literacy issues, and that has caused them adverse harm.

Employment and support allowance was envisaged as a way of supporting people with limited capacity for work as a result of sickness and disability. It sought to recognise the barriers that disabled people face in seeking work—the disabling attitudes, the disabling environments and the additional costs that disabled people bear, day to day, just leading their lives. ESA extended a small measure of recognition for the inequality that our society generates, and now even that small gesture is to be torn away.

Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind, is reported as saying:

“People being supported by ESA receive a higher rate than those on JSA because they face additional barriers as a result of their illness or disability, and typically take longer to work into work. Almost 60 per cent of people on JSA move off the benefit within 6 months, while almost 60 per cent of people in the WRAG need this support for at least two years.”

What assessment have the Government made of the impact of this measure on disabled people?

According to a survey conducted by the Disability Benefits Consortium, almost a third of people on ESA who were surveyed said that they cannot afford to eat on the levels of ESA that they receive now. Inclusion Scotland has said that the proposals are “a direct attack on the living standards of disabled people, their families, carers and children and will result in hundreds of thousands more being plunged into poverty and destitution”.

I hope that today the Minister can justify the Government’s approach to supporting disabled people and explain how cuts to social protection funding will take disabled people out of poverty. Unfortunately, I fear that the newest cuts will continue to do what this Government’s austerity project has already done and cause additional financial difficulties for people living with disabilities.

Poverty and disability should not have to be so closely intertwined, and with a concerted effort to reform our social security system and ensure that disabled people have an adequate income and decent, appropriate employment opportunities, we can address the severe inequalities that disabled people experience.

We know that poverty and disability can be mutually reinforcing and that disabled people have too often been let down by decisions made in this place, which in recent years has tended to make their situation worse. However, this Government’s record has too often been to deny or explain away the statistics when confronted with them, and to deny the impact that their policies are having on real people in real communities across the UK. I somewhat suspect—that I hope not—that that will continue today. I very much hope that the Minister takes this opportunity to prove me wrong.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Roger. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) and congratulating her not only on securing this debate, but on her incredibly thoughtful and instructive contribution. She highlighted a number of issues, and I think it is probably fair to say that we completely agree on 95% of those, such as her assessment of the barriers that people with disabilities face: the recognition that their circumstances are difficult, and therefore that we have, quite rightly, social security
protections in place for them; and that there is always more that we can do. There was also her reflection on past Governments’ approaches and the failures of systems to provide the right kind of support—adequate support—for people who have been stuck in poverty and have faced barriers and inequalities. The real difficulties, hardships and challenges associated with disabilities were also absolutely recognised by her, and I pay tribute to her on that basis.

I also want to comment on the hon. Lady’s reflection on disability, inequality and poverty at an international level. She was right in this debate to highlight the significance of the challenges that communities and individuals face around the world. For many millions of people internationally—we should put this in some kind of context—particularly in the underdeveloped world and in developing economies and countries, the barriers that they face are enormous for a wide range of reasons. It is not just about access to healthcare or support; it is the fact that the development of their economies and their societies is taking a very different trajectory from ours and they do not have the type of provisions we have in place for people who are experiencing poverty, disabilities or barriers.

If I may speak in the UK context and bring this back to home, the Department for Work and Pensions and the present Government have consistently focused—as, to be fair, did the previous Government—on the fact that what comes to tackling poverty and inequality, the aim of our welfare reforms has been to secure employment, putting into practice the principle that work is the best route out of poverty. Evidence shows that nearly three quarters of workless families who have found full employment have escaped poverty.

Specifically—I will come to some of the points that the hon. Member for Glasgow East raised—we are very much focused, in the policy changes that we are making, on helping people with health conditions and disabilities to overcome some of the clear and stark barriers that they have faced in obtaining employment, so that they can rightly benefit from having access to employment opportunities and being in work. At the same time, we are also focused on protecting people through social security. For those who are vulnerable in society, particularly disabled people—it is worth highlighting that spending on the main disability benefits went up by over £2 billion in real terms over the course of the previous Parliament—it is right that we have the right kind of financial protection in place.

Universal credit was mentioned. We have brought in new exemptions for households entitled to carer’s allowance and the UC carer element, as well as for households receiving guardian allowance, which will be brought forward at the end of the year.

This is a much wider debate on how Government policy can help to transform people’s lives by tackling the root causes of poverty, supporting people into work and helping them progress. It is not just about yo-yoing or cycling in and out of the benefits system. I refer specifically to universal credit, which will support people, whatever their circumstances, to put the right frameworks in place to help them into work. At the same time, our focus has been on supporting more disabled people into work. We have made good progress, and 3.2 million disabled people are currently in employment. That is an increase of more than 150,000 over the past year.

My colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People, is focusing on a huge agenda for employment, to halve the employment disability gap and—there was a debate in the House yesterday on our wider welfare reforms—by means of the Disability Confident campaign, to bring together more employers to work with us to create employment opportunities for people with disabilities, to challenge attitudes to disabilities, to help remove potential employment barriers and, importantly, to ensure that people who have barriers and disabilities have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

It is important to highlight that many parliamentary colleagues across all parties are doing a great deal of work in their constituencies to promote and support the concept of Disability Confident and working with employers in their constituencies. I am happy to work with the hon. Lady and her colleagues to look at some practical things we can do, not just in her constituency, but in others throughout Scotland. We are working with employers to do a lot more to bridge the employment disability gap. At the same time, a lot of good work is taking place in our jobcentres to change attitudes and to work with employers and bring more together.

**Natalie McGarry:** I thank the Minister for the tone of her response so far. I congratulate the Government on their target of halving the disability employment gap, but in the Department for Work and Pensions the number of advisers for disabled people is disproportionately low, which is a real barrier to helping people into work.

**Priti Patel:** The hon. Lady touched on the employment and support allowance, which was also part of the debate in the House yesterday. Some clear reforms are taking place and we are committed to publishing a White Paper in the spring which will focus on how we can provide the right kind of support and not just financial support. We are great believers in practical support. We are making sure that advisers and the right kind of support are in place to help people with barriers and disabilities and to give them the right guidance and the support that they need. At the same time, we are investing a lot more.

In our summer Budget there was provision of at least £115 million for a joint work and health unit to improve the work and health outcomes for people with health conditions and disabilities. The unit has started work. We are also working with disability charities to look at the right way—we will have pilots around the country—to provide practical support and schemes to support people with barriers and health conditions. Mental health is a classic example. The Government are committed to a lot of funding for mental health provision. In particular, we are seeking through this unit to join up the provision and to make sure the signposting and the right sort of provision can take place.

**Angela Crawley:** Last week, I met employees at the jobcentre in my local area who spoke extensively about their work to support people back into employment. They raised the point that a large percentage of those who present at the jobcentre suffer from mental ill health. Does the Minister accept that these people require a longer period of support to sustain long-term employment? That may cost the Government more in the long run, but it will benefit their lives.
Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight that. We know that the challenges and barriers facing people with mental health problems are enormous. One purpose of universal credit is to support them while they try out work and undertake employment that may stretch them in the long run, and support them in work as well. At the same time, we must do more to work with employers. The Government do not have all the answers. Employers and their organisers have great health and occupational health support, and we must look at how we can leverage that to support individuals in employment.

If nothing else, this debate has highlighted that, yes, more needs to be done and we cannot stand still. Through our White Paper and the joint work between DWP and the Department of Health, the Government are looking at how to bring resources together in the right sort of structured way to ensure that we can deliver the services that in the long run can transform lives. These people are furthest away from the labour market. Their lives have been challenging for many reasons and they need the right sort of support to provide them with motivation and encouragement to get out of the cycle of inequality, deprivation, poverty and the combined factors that have stopped them from working in the past.

I am conscious of the time, Sir Roger, so in conclusion I want to emphasise that through the reforms and our current work—a White Paper will be published—the Government are committed to enabling not just disabled people, but those with health conditions and barriers, to fulfil their full potential while protecting the most vulnerable. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Glasgow East and some of her colleagues when the White Paper is published and hearing their views on how we can do more to support people with these conditions back into work.

Question put and agreed to.

Crohn’s and Colitis Treatment: England

4.29 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the treatment of people with Crohn’s and colitis in England.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am aware that there are different treatments in Scotland and Wales, but I want to focus on Crohn’s disease and colitis in England.

I am pleased to be leading this very important debate on Crohn’s and colitis, which affect more than 250,000 people in England and 300,000 in the UK. I have been working with the charity Crohn’s and Colitis UK, some of whose members are here today. They would be delighted to meet any hon. Members participating in the debate because they would like to get some publicity for that particularly wonderful charity, which is based in my constituency in St Albans. It does a tremendous amount of work for those who live with these challenging conditions.

I am also pleased to say that I have been reading the feedback from the digital debate on Facebook. That is a new concept, and I am very pleased that the House is offering it. I wish to express my thanks to Crohn’s and Colitis UK and the Westminster Hall digital debate team for arranging the online forum. We received 1,068 comments on the forum, and the posts were shared 258 times and liked 734 times, so it has been highly informative to this debate.

Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis are the two main forms of inflammatory bowel disease. Both are chronic lifelong conditions that cause inflammation of the digestive system. Ulcerative colitis affects only the large intestine, whereas Crohn’s disease affects the whole digestive system. According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, it is estimated that in the UK 115,000 people have Crohn’s disease and 146,000 have ulcerative colitis. That is an estimated 460 people per constituency. I keep using the word “estimated” because there is no national database. At my last meeting with the charity, it stressed that it would very much like there to be a national database and better record keeping on those people who are presenting with the disease.

The most common symptoms of inflammatory bowel disease include diarrhoea, cramping pains in the abdomen, tiredness and fatigue, and loss of appetite and loss of weight. The exact causes of Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis are unclear, but there is evidence that IBD can cluster in families, and having an affected family member is a risk factor. IBD is a lifelong condition, but people can get it at any age. It most commonly first presents in the teenage years and early twenties—the mean age of diagnosis is 29.5 years. About 18,000 new cases of IBD are diagnosed each year, and that number is increasing. This is not a trivial complaint. IBD can be painful, disrupt normal activities and reduce quality of life, particularly during periods of active disease. These conditions can affect the individual’s ability to work, learn, socialise and form and maintain relationships.

We British are famous for our lavatorial sense of humour, and just saying the word “bottom” or “bum” is usually enough to bring on a fit of the giggles, so it is no surprise that we, the British public, are not good at discussing bowel problems or even seeking help for
them—no wonder IBD has been described as a hidden disease. That reluctance can lead to sufferers feeling isolated and stigmatised.

According to Crohn's and Colitis UK, the causes of IBD are a combination of factors. Those include the genes that a person has inherited, together with an abnormal reaction of the immune system to certain bacteria in the intestines, probably triggered by something in the environment. Viruses, bacteria, diet, smoking and stress have all been suggested as environmental triggers, but there is no definitive evidence that any one of those is the cause of IBD. That is why, as I know the charity would also say, we need more research and more evidence. We need IBD to have a higher profile, as it affects so many of our constituents.

There is currently no cure for Crohn’s or colitis. The main aim of treating IBDs is either to heal the inflammation and so reduce symptoms during a flare-up or to prevent flare-ups from happening. NICE has recommended a number of different medicines for IBD, which can be taken in different ways by patients, but if individuals do not respond to medication, surgery is considered as an option—20% of people with ulcerative colitis and about 60% to 70% of people with Crohn’s disease go on to have surgery. A large number of our constituents will be forced to have surgery as a result of the disease. The lifetime medical costs for IBD are comparable to those for other major diseases such as diabetes and cancer. It is estimated to cost £900 million per annum, UK-wide. Crohn’s and Colitis UK currently funds about £500,000 worth of research every year into the causes of IBD, and treatments and care for people with IBD. Although that sounds like a large amount of money, in terms of the number of sufferers it is not a large amount.

There is a new research study under way from the National Institute for Health Research, called the IBD BioResource. The aim is to accelerate research into Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis and build on recent major advances in the understanding of the genetic basis of these conditions. The IBD BioResource is being launched for roll-out nationwide through 2016. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister how much support the Government are giving to the IBD BioResource study.

Crohn’s and Colitis UK says that there is a low level of awareness of IBD among the public, policy makers and even clinicians. It says:

“Public awareness of IBD is lower than for Parkinson’s and MS”—

multiple sclerosis—

“respectively, despite more people being affected by IBD than both diseases combined.”

Most of us will be very familiar with those two diseases.

At this point, I want to include some of the comments from the digital debate on Facebook. One contributor said:

“I’ve had Crohn’s for 18 years. For me it’s pain, fatigue and always having to explain to people what’s wrong with me and why I can’t come to work or do things.”

Another referred to:

“The Stigma of having a bowel disease. People not believing you and belittling how you feel because they can’t see it.”

Another said that we need:

“To raise more awareness of the illness! Make people more aware of what we go through on a day to day basis!”

Another talked about:

“Having to try, and try, and TRY to make people realise that it’s a disability and that just because you ‘don’t look ill’ (in a wheelchair) you still have issues that they will never understand.”

Many made the point that the illness controls and disrupts their lives to such an extent that they are in fact disabled by it. It is a hidden disability, and many call for it to be recognised as a disability. Therefore my question for the Minister is this: what are the Government doing to increase awareness of inflammatory bowel disease, and what are they doing to measure accurately the number of people living with IBD in England?

The charity tells me that early diagnosis of Crohn’s and colitis can prevent emergency hospital admissions, which have a cost to the NHS, and can help to avoid clinical complications. Unfortunately, in a substantial number of cases that is simply not happening. Studies have shown that 35% of people with Crohn’s and 16% of people with colitis had three or more emergency admissions before they received their diagnosis.

In the digital debate on Facebook, a sufferer said:

“I was treated for 6 months by my GP for food poisoning and/or anorexia before eventually ending up hospitalised as an emergency. The hospital did biopsies that day and confirmed Crohn’s. My Crohn’s turned out to be particularly aggressive and unresponsive to treatment and numerous surgeries.”

Another said:

“GPs need to be more up to date with IBD and stop saying it’s just a virus or IBS”—

irritable bowel syndrome. They continued:

“It took quite a few years of pain and complaining before I was diagnosed with Ulcerative Colitis.”

There is clear guidance from NICE on referral. The NICE quality standard for IBD states that people who have been experiencing abdominal pain or discomfort, bloating or a change in bowel habits, such as diarrhoea, with or without rectal bleeding, for at least six weeks should be suspected of having IBD. However, the feedback is clear that for many that is currently not happening and the guidance is not being followed.

NICE recommended faecal calprotectin testing as an option to help doctors to distinguish between inflammatory bowel diseases, such as Crohn’s and colitis, and non-inflammatory bowel diseases, such as IBS. That testing should enable quicker identification of suspected IBD and referral to a specialist, and reduce the number of unnecessary endoscopies carried out. Therefore more effective use of faecal calprotectin testing in primary care should enable quicker and more economical diagnosis of IBD patients, ensuring better and more efficient care in England.

What steps will the Minister take to improve the identification of suspected IBD? What are the Government doing to increase awareness of IBD in general practice among GPs? What steps will she take to improve the rate of referral of people with suspected IBD from primary care to the experts in secondary care? Will the Department undertake an evaluation of the uptake of faecal calprotectin testing by clinical commissioning groups, which NICE recommends, and the time taken by labs to process the results?

The IBD standards have been widely recognised throughout the IBD community, and later rounds of the IBD audit have benchmarked IBD services directly against them, but there is still a lot to do. Some 14% of services are still unable to provide people with Crohn’s or colitis...
with access to an IBD specialist nurse. Many of us would think of having access to a Parkinson’s specialist nurse, but IBD specialist nurses are few and far between, and many that have them struggle to maintain that vital service. Nearly one in four—23%—of all services have no access to specialist nutritional support despite the high level of malnutrition experienced by people suffering with IBD. Only 12% of services have a clear process to enable people with IBD to see a psychologist or a counsellor with a particular knowledge of IBD, and IBD has been described on many occasions as being a traumatising disease that leaves many people feeling isolated and unable to discuss with anyone—sometimes even their partners and closest friends—the reasons why they are often ill.

Sufferers complained online of a postcode lottery with IBD nurses. The lack of nurses was cited by many, who also said that GPs needed more training to identify people with Crohn’s and to assist in providing faster referrals or appointments when treatments need adjusting. Some sufferers found that their GP even seemed reluctant to make those referrals. Many sufferers said that employers need to have a greater awareness of the impact of IBD on their employees, especially given that flare-ups can occur at any time.

What is the Department doing to ensure the implementation of the IBD standards in England, and can the Minister give assurances to those living with IBD that they will not be forgotten on a strategic level by the NHS? What action is the Department taking to ensure that the NICE quality standard for IBD disease is being implemented across England? For those living with IBD, debilitating symptoms such as diarrhoea can occur instantly and unpredictably. Crohn’s and Colitis UK has been championing quick access to suitable toilet facilities. I hope the Minister will encourage all local authorities to evaluate the public toilet provision in their locality.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): Increasing access to toilets away from home is of benefit to all groups in society but it is especially crucial for those living with Crohn’s and ulcerative colitis, who have concerns about not reaching a toilet in time. Does the hon. Lady believe that other nations in the UK can learn from Welsh Labour’s Public Health (Wales) Bill, which treats access to toilets as a public health issue?

Mrs Main: It certainly is a public health issue. In the first Parliament I was in, from 2005 to 2010, I was on the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government and we looked into the issue of toilet access. I do not think that much has improved since then and that was under a Labour Government. I am sorry to say that we have not made a lot of progress. At the time, ordinary businesses were showing and displaying signs reading, “We welcome people using our public facilities.” The evidence that came out of that Communities and Local Government Committee report was that toilet provision was not just needed for people with things such as Crohn’s and colitis—there was a vast spectrum of other conditions for which people would welcome toilet provision, but that is for another debate.

It is very obvious that more focus on the cure and cause of IBD is urgently needed. I hope the Minister will give sufferers of this debilitating disease a cause for hope and a better future. I look forward to her answers—I hope she can give them today—to a large number of the questions that I have raised on behalf of those who have responded to the online debate and on behalf of the charity Crohn’s and Colitis UK, which is doing such a lot of good work. Look for the purple badge.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I think four Members wish to speak. I will not put a formal time limit on speeches but request that Members confine their remarks to about six minutes. If we are sensible, everybody should get a chance to speak.

Melanie Onn (Great Grinsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate. It is most welcome, especially to those people who are suffering and feel that they have a forgotten illness. It is important to discuss this immune system-related condition and to remind those in the Government that IBD is not IBS. I previously submitted a written question to the Minister about some of the data on Crohn’s and colitis gastroenterology appointments and asked whether they were being cancelled or postponed by the provider. No data are collected on that and it seems that quite a lot of data are not collected on the illness. I welcome the hon. Lady’s comments on centralising data on sufferers. As a sufferer myself, I think it would be a particularly good idea.

The appointments issue was recognised by my local trust. First appointments after a referral by a GP were timely but subsequent appointments to consultants were frequently being rescheduled at short notice and people would not be able to see their consultant for a further six months. For IBD sufferers, the gaps between assessments and, for consultants, the gaps between monitoring, are increasingly problematic. Consultants cannot get the data they need to monitor sufferers properly.

Specialist IBD nurses are absolutely essential as a resource for between-appointment reassurance and advice for sufferers. The nurses cover not only IBD. Those at my local hospital, including Kay Foster, who has been particularly helpful to me, cover IBS and a whole range of bowel conditions. Her caseload is enormous but if someone rings her, she will always call back. If that service were available more widely, it would be greatly appreciated.

Funnily enough, I had an email from a constituent, who said that she has recently come out of hospital after being admitted with suspected inflammatory bowel disease after having a camera investigation. She was discharged from hospital after becoming very ill and having to be put on a drip because she was dehydrated and collapsed. She is now on a waiting list of about six weeks for a CT scan. At the moment, she is constantly having flare-ups as soon as she eats anything. She is losing a lot of weight and is not digesting anything. Her big concern is that she is malnourished, dehydrated, weak, exhausted, in pain and constantly having to use the toilet.

4.46 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.
Melanie Onn: My constituent is suffering with daily anxiety attacks. She has three young children, and she feels as if she cannot be a proper parent because she is so poorly. She has already signed off sick and is unable to work. She asked me to intervene to try to move her appointment forward. Of course, I recognise that numerous people will, unfortunately, be in that situation.

In my previous role as an organiser for Unison, I met a carer for older people in a nursing home. She had two young children, too, and she was struck down by the illness particularly severely. Within a short period of time, she was taken down the route of capability by her employer. Fortunately, we were able to intervene because, as a long-term condition, it falls under the Equality Act 2010. We were able to assist, but all employers should be aware and make reasonable adjustments, as they are required, including to work patterns, which can assist in supporting people.

At the moment, treatment seems to be limited to preventive measures, but that is very much about people's physical health. It is also about mental health, because stress can form part of the illness. Continued use of steroids is not a healthy way to live and can have negative long-term effects. Many people are desperate to get control of this disease, and investment in research to try to combat the illness cannot come soon enough.

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this important debate. Helping to increase the understanding and awareness of Crohn's and colitis is of huge importance to the 300,000 people across the UK who suffer from one of those complex, lifelong and potentially life-threatening diseases. It is thought that as many as 26,000 people in Scotland have Crohn's or colitis, a higher incidence rate than anywhere else in the UK.

Living with IBD can have a huge impact on every aspect of a person's life. It has serious physical and mental health implications, as I found out when I met local representatives of Crohn's and Colitis UK soon after I was elected. I was surprised to find out that there were hundreds of people living in my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock who suffer from these hidden, often misunderstood and dreadful conditions. It is vital that we try and reach out to these people, who may feel isolated or be coping badly with their health.

Living with IBD can be a daily struggle. Some symptoms of the disease can be embarrassing, which can lead to people suffering, without receiving adequate support, or feeling isolated. As we have heard, among the most distressing symptoms of IBD are diarrhoea and a constant urge to have a bowel movement. This means that people with IBD need constant access to a toilet, due to the frequency and urgency of their bowel movements. That is why the availability of clean public toilets is so crucial for those with IBD.

Understandably, these symptoms are often accompanied by a continuous anxiety about the sudden need to go to the toilet but having little time to find one. Who here can imagine the nightmare of being constantly under threat of being incontinent in public? For many individuals, that anxiety can have a devastating impact on their ability to engage in activities outside the home, such as working, shopping or socialising.

I am trying to help my constituents by working with the local Crohn's and Colitis UK group on a scheme that encourages shops, restaurants and other businesses to have an open-door policy for people with Crohn's or colitis who carry the “Can't Wait” card. Something as simple as a sticker in a premise's windows will allow people with these conditions to know that they can use a toilet that in other circumstances may not be open to the public. We also need to challenge the public's attitude about disability, which is probably down to the logos that are used, and show that those with disabilities are not always in wheelchairs.

One of the things that people in my constituency who have IBD do not have to worry about is paying for their prescriptions. One of the main reasons the Scottish Government scrapped prescription charges was the benefit to people with life-long conditions such as IBD. Research shows that as a result of an unfair, outdated and arbitrary system of exemptions, many people with long-term conditions in England are severely compromising their health because they are unable to afford prescription charges.

Although much needs to be done to improve the treatment of people with Crohn's and colitis, I ask the Government to recognise the benefits of scrapping prescription charges for people with long-term conditions, and I ask all Members of the House to work with their local Crohn's and Colitis UK group to help to foster the kind of environment where people suffering from these incurable and relapsing chronic conditions can feel confident to leave their homes and take part in the everyday activities that most of us take for granted.
A recent Crohn's and Colitis UK survey of pre-employed young people with inflammatory bowel disease showed that the prospect of gaining their first job was regarded as a daunting challenge. Employability emerged as their overriding concern, and when they found themselves in work, they found that they were often too embarrassed or scared to tell their employers about their needs. When I secured that debate—four years ago, nearly—I said that all we were calling for from employers was some understanding and some respect. However, with the welfare reform changes that lay ahead, I was deeply concerned that that was not going to be the case. That is why I am disappointed that the report found that 69% of the young people interviewed felt that their IBD had prevented them not only from reaching their full educational potential, but from having any chance of employment, with over half ruling out some sort of career option.

Back in January 2014, I took on an intern for three months who has Crohn's disease. She completed her internship and I was very impressed by her work. There was an opening in my office and I offered her a job as my parliamentary research assistant, and she has been with me ever since—although I will say that in some parts of this speech she has written “irritable bowel disease” rather than “inflammatory bowel disease”, even though she herself suffers from the condition, but I will forgive her that. I was keen to take part in the internship programme, as I valued the idea of giving a younger member of the public an incredible career experience, while also teaching politicians such as myself about inflammatory bowel disease—she has written “irritable bowel disease” again, Sir Roger.

In January 2015, I hosted the parliamentary launch of the Work Foundation's report on IBD and employment, alongside Crohn's and Colitis UK—I am delighted they are here today, as the hon. Member for St Albans mentioned. In the UK, at least 300,000 people, or one in 210 people, have Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, which are both known as inflammatory bowel disease. That equates to roughly around 460 people in each parliamentary constituency across the UK. These are incurable and relapsing chronic long-term conditions. The symptoms can be present at any age, but most commonly in the teens and twenties.

People with IBD are high users of health services, with 50% of patients with Crohn's disease requiring surgery during their lifetime. I know this first hand, as my parliamentary researcher, who has Crohn's disease, as I have mentioned, has had four operations in the two years she has been working in my office. In saying that, I pay tribute to Laura for her bravery, because, for something as private and embarrassing as some of the symptoms she has suffered from, she has not been afraid to bring that to the fore. We need more people like her, not only in politics but throughout working life.

Medical treatment will often include corticosteroids and immunosuppressants, including the biological therapies that are the latest treatments offered for inflammatory bowel disease. These conditions can have a devastating and life-stopping impact on a person's life, due to the unpredictable nature of flare-ups, together with sleep deprivation, pain and fatigue, and they can severely affect an individual's self-esteem.

There appears to be a low level of awareness of inflammatory bowel disease among the public, policy makers and clinicians. Public awareness of IBD is lower than it is for Parkinson's and multiple sclerosis, as the hon. Member for St Albans mentioned, despite more people being affected by IBD than by both these conditions combined. The lack of public awareness is exacerbated by the stigma attached to the symptoms of IBD and the fact that it is a hidden illness.

Four years ago, I called for some understanding from employers. With debates such as this and events we have had in Parliament, I hope that understanding can come to the fore. If there is a message that should emerge from today's debate from sufferers of IBD such as my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and my parliamentary researcher, it is that there is no point in hiding IBD away. If someone is suffering, they should ask their employer for help. Most people I meet—I was a trade union official—are understanding. I have tried to be an understanding employer myself. Once people overcome that barrier, they will find that they can have a working life that is fruitful and that can lead to some great opportunities.

I had wanted to say more, Sir Roger, but I understand that there is a time limit. However, I will say this to anybody who suffers from Crohn's or colitis: please do not hide away. If you are suffering, then speak to your employer. Speak to your teacher. Tell them what you are suffering from and they will be understanding. I genuinely believe that Crohn's and colitis is as much of a problem for this country as dementia, whereas it is not mentioned because it is embarrassing—it is not something that we talk about. Crohn's should be pushed up the political agenda, and I hope that with today's debate we will do that.

5.9 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for securing this debate, because, as we have heard in some of the contributions, there is a lack of awareness of the difference between irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel disease. Having been a surgeon for 20 of those before specialising purely in breast cancer, I know well what the outcome can be for people with IBD.

As the hon. Lady said, the rate of surgery is such that between 50% and 70% of Crohn's patients and almost a third of those with ulcerative colitis will end up having an operation. The conditions are not trivial or embarrassing; they are life-threatening. It is therefore absolutely important that we try to get the research funding so that we can understand the cause, because that then gives us a chance of finding the cure. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) mentioned, for some reason Scotland has a very high incidence of such conditions. Is that genetic or is it environmental? Looking at what is going on in different parts of the UK may help us get a handle on what is going on. Those are the things that we need to look for in the long term.

Normally when we are in the Chamber talking about a disease, we are talking about access to medicines in the major sense of not being allowed a new drug that...
would make a difference. Unusually, that is not the case here. The anti-tumour necrosis factor drugs can make a huge difference and have been passed by all the nations of the UK, but there is an issue with patients getting all the medicines that they require. If patients are on biologics, they will not pay prescription charges, but most of them are on a panoply of drugs, and for those they do have to pay. England needs to consider that Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have got rid of prescription charges. That move was led by Wales in 2007.

Plenty of research shows that, in general, less than 10% of the population pays for prescriptions, with half as pre-payment and half as pay-as-you-go. However, whenever surveys are done of people with chronic diseases, we find that some 75% to 85% are paying. That is because many of those diseases do not hit people once they have conveniently retired and qualify for free prescriptions. We have talked about how Crohn's may hit people in their teens and how ulcerative colitis may hit people in their 20s and 30s, and they will have those conditions for life. They will be on different medications: methotrexate, steroids, enemas—the whole works—and they will be paying £8 an item. We talk about pre-payment, but many of these people will be in poorer jobs, because there will be times when they are not so well and when they are in and out of work as they have a waxing and waning condition. Because of that, they have to try to work out whether it will benefit them to pay £100-odd to have a pre-payment certificate. Perhaps they have a good year, perhaps they do not.

What has been shown in all the research is that approximately 35% of people report having not picked up a prescription because of charges, and approximately 30% have done that repeatedly. With all conditions we know that if someone is not taking their medication, they will get worse, but that is particularly the case with Crohn's and colitis, which have such complications as strictures and toxic megacolon.

Working in breast cancer, we talk about “the big C”, but when I was doing general and emergency surgery I used to think of Crohn’s as “the wee C”, because it affects virtually all of someone’s life. It is debilitating and will affect everything that they do. These people are in and out of hospital, developing strictures, perforations and ischemic bowels and undergoing ileostomies, reversals and so on. It goes on and on. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) mentioned his member of staff, and I suggest he proofreads his speeches. She may write them, but it is his job to check them. People with Crohn's often end up in hospital having expensive and incredibly difficult surgery. To go back into the abdomen of someone who has Crohn's is a surgical nightmare. I have been there with the sweat pouring off me, trying to do those operations. Using the anti-TNF drugs earlier and ensuring that patients take all the medication required will make a difference in reducing surgery and, in the end, that is more cost-effective.

The other thing is access to care and trying to make it easier for people to get on with normal life. Along with Crohn's and Colitis UK, the Scottish Government funded a two-year pilot that was looking at allowing patients to be much more linked to the clinician using e-health technology. That was carried out in the highlands to look at people living in rural areas, and in Greater Glasgow and Clyde to look at people living in a large city. The pilot developed information and support for patients and redesigned the services around the patients. Using the technology, the patient has an app that gives them information. They can have a two-way conversation with a clinician and they can register their symptoms. The clinician has a dashboard on their patients, and they can see whether someone is getting worse. That allows them to say, “Increase that”, or “Decrease this.”

It means that patients do not always have to go and sit in the hospital if they are trying to hold down a job. If someone lives in the highlands and has to travel four hours to get to Inverness, that is a major pain when they are trying to maintain a normal life.

A new strategy is being launched in Scotland in June, and its aim is to meet the UK national Crohn’s and colitis standards. It will be the first comprehensive integrated strategy in the United Kingdom. It will create a patient portal where people can access their clinical letters and blood results so that they learn that they can manage their own disease. When we talk about the five year forward vision, or the 2020 vision in Scotland, the aim is to enable and empower patients to manage their chronic diseases as far as possible.

The last thing that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Islwyn was changing attitudes in society. Not everyone with a condition is on crutches or in a wheelchair, and we need to get past the embarrassment of talking about bottoms or going to the toilet. We need to realise that these are serious conditions that are debilitating. We simply need to make access to toilets available for everyone, whether they are elderly, incontinent or have inflammatory bowel disease. It is about trying to get past that access just being for certain people, because it is important for a lot of people.

5.16 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I too, commend the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) not only on securing the debate and the eloquent way in which she opened it, but on the work she is doing to help raise awareness of Crohn’s and colitis. Although the debate is about the situation in England, we have had a valuable set of contributions from Members from Wales and Scotland. While it is right that the public health Minister is responsible for this policy area in England, there is a lot of experience and research that we should be sharing. We should also be sharing a lot more understanding of what each part of the NHS in each respective part of the United Kingdom is achieving in the work to try to tackle some of the issues.

I put on record my thanks to Crohn's and Colitis UK for all its hard work in briefing Members of Parliament for this debate, and for all the work it has done since its inception in 1979. I will let you into a secret, Sir Roger. I am fairly new to the shadow public health role, although I have been on the shadow Health team for some time now. I must confess to not being entirely abreast of the issues facing IBD sufferers before looking at them for this debate. Frankly, what I found stunned me. More than 300,000 people in the UK suffer from Crohn's or ulcerative colitis, and that equates to some 460 people in my constituency alone.

While that is a lot of people, IBD is not as prevalent as some of the more common long-term conditions. That means that research funding, as we have heard over the course of this debate, is thin on the ground,
and there is not the same level of awareness in the general public at large. Put simply, it is not a glamorous cause. There are few outward signs of having the condition, but the effect on lifestyle is massive for the people concerned. Many of the problems that we discuss regularly in terms of cancer are just as pronounced when it comes to IBD, and not only include pain, fatigue, sleep deprivation and disruption to life in general, but also relate to awareness, diagnosis and psychological impact, and I want to touch on those things.

First, I want to address the problems of diagnosis. GPs need to be more aware of IBD. Every medical practitioner knows of instances of general abdominal pain and irregular bowel function being written off as IBS. As I have already said, I was not fully aware of the problem of misdiagnosis until I heard from Crohn’s and Colitis UK, so the matter does come down to awareness both among the general public and, importantly, among the medical community. Because the most pronounced symptoms of IBD are often the most embarrassing to discuss, the issue often gets swept under the carpet, even in the GP’s surgery.

Studies have shown that 35% of people with Crohn’s had three or more emergency admissions before they received a diagnosis. Frankly, that just is not good enough. I accept that some delays to diagnosis are inevitable, considering the nature of the disease, and clinical judgment should receive an appropriate degree of latitude, but we can and we must do much more.

There are some welcome signs. In 2013, NICE recommended faecal calprotectin testing as one option for doctors to help distinguish between IBS and IBD, which is welcome. There can be more effective use of that at primary care level, which would save not only money but would ensure better and more efficient care for patients: an undeniable win-win situation for all involved. How will the public health Minister improve the efficiency of the identification of suspected IBD? We also need to reduce the unnecessary use of endoscopies where less intrusive tests would do just fine.

I want to spend some time talking about the psychological impact, which Members have touched on today. Last year, the Opposition established the post of shadow Mental Health Minister, a job in which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) is making a significant impact. Mental health is of paramount importance to the Labour party, and it is often the unseen damage that is most destructive. IBD symptoms, diagnostics and treatment can have a disastrous impact on a sufferer’s mental health. The uncertainty and sense of lost potential must be absolutely awful, and I cannot help but imagine how I would feel were one of my children told that they had IBD.

An audit in 2014 found that only 12% of services have a clear process to enable people suffering from IBD to see a psychologist or professional with knowledge of IBD. That figure may have improved—we might see that when the next audit is carried out—but however we look at it, it is not good enough. About 41% of IBD sufferers experience high levels of anxiety, and of course we must do more, because many people living with IBD feel that simply having easier access to psychiatric services at critical points would help immensely. With the Government’s laudable commitment to ensuring parity of esteem, which we are fully behind, what is the Minister’s Department doing to make sure that people with IBD across England have the appropriate level of access to tailored psychological support with professionals who are familiar with the very specific issues they face?

I am pleased that hon. Members have mentioned the access to toilets strategy formed by my Labour colleagues in Wales. Obviously, an episode of incontinence in public is extremely embarrassing, and with incredibly poor access to public toilets being endemic across England, a person with IBD can feel anxious even being in an unfamiliar place. Many people with IBD have seen a devastating impact on their capacity to lead normal lives when they are away from home. I am therefore pleased that the Welsh Government have led by treating access to public toilets as a public health issue.

The Welsh Assembly is now considering the Public Health (Wales) Bill, which is close to the final stages of the legislative process. Some fairly simple steps can have a big impact on the ability of Crohn’s and colitis sufferers to lead normal lives when out and about. Councils, for example, could make better use of the toilets that are already in the community, whether in public buildings or private businesses. The Bill will place a duty on every council to publish a local toilet strategy. The Welsh Government are leading the way, and I hope the UK Government will follow suit. I appreciate that it might require intervention by the Minister’s colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government to halt some of the public toilet closures that we have seen in recent years, but will the Minister offer to discuss this not only with her colleagues in DCLG, but with my Welsh Labour colleague, Mark Drakeford? I think there is plenty of potential here.

My thanks go to all hon. Members for their contributions this afternoon. Some incredibly astute points have been made, and I hope the Minister goes away better informed, as I know I will, as a result of this debate. We owe it to those 300,000 people in the UK suffering from Crohn’s disease or colitis to come up with some better ideas in the coming months and years. This debate has given us a good starting point, such as the need for better public toilet access, and the need for more widespread use of less invasive diagnostic techniques. About 18,000 new cases of IBD are diagnosed every year, so this is not some fringe problem, but an issue facing people in every single community across the country. I look forward to hearing the public health Minister’s response.

5.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. We have had a good debate with many first-class contributions. I hope it demonstrates to those watching and those who participated in such great numbers in the Facebook debate that Parliament is taking this issue seriously, as we have filled the time available to us with various contributions. I hope to be able to respond to most of the points made. If not, as ever, I will try to respond post debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing the debate. It is always interesting for a Member of Parliament with a great charity in the constituency; the MP ends up becoming quite expert,
and my hon. Friend. Friend has done an excellent charity proud this afternoon in raising the issues. Crohn’s and Colitis UK is the national charity campaigning on these issues. I pay tribute to its work as it campaigns tirelessly to raise the profile of Crohn’s and colitis and to provide support and advice to all those affected. My hon. Friend is a keen supporter of its work.

I will not spend time describing the diseases themselves or the number of people affected, because others have eloquently done so. Instead, I will talk about some of the ways in which we are responding. A great many of our fellow citizens are affected, so it is right that we have this debate today.

Some hon. Members raised the issue of GPs, diagnosis and training. Digestive health features both as part of the undergraduate medical curriculum and GP specialty training. For GPs the required competencies include: understanding the epidemiology of digestive problems as they present in primary care; how to interpret common symptoms in general practice; and how to demonstrate a systematic approach to investigating digestive symptoms such as IBD. IBD also features in the content guide for the Royal College of General Practitioners applied knowledge test, a key part of the assessment of trainee GPs, which must be passed in order to qualify.

As others have said, diagnosing the symptoms of IBD can be challenging for a GP. Even though the numbers are quite large, as we have heard, if we divide the numbers by GP practice across the country, it might be the case that some GPs are not seeing people very often. The variety of symptoms and the range of their severity differ from patient to patient. Problems may also arise owing to the fact that the symptoms of IBD, such as abdominal pain and weight loss, are shared with other more common, less serious conditions, such as IBS, which is estimated to affect 12 million people in the UK, as opposed to IBD, which affects around 300,000. However, as others have said, a misdiagnosis or a delayed diagnosis can lead to a range of further complications for IBD suffers, so it is important that clinicians have the tools and resources to help them to identify symptoms when a patient presents.

In addition to their clinical training and experience, a number of tools and resources are now available to clinicians to help them to diagnose and manage IBD. The “Map of Medicine” is an excellent free online evidence-based guide and clinical decision support tool, which is available to GPs and other healthcare professionals working in the NHS. It has published diagnosis and treatment maps for patients with IBD. The map supports GPs on issues such as differential diagnosis and helps them to identify “red flag” IBD symptoms and provide advice on appropriate diagnostics and referrals. NICE has produced a clinical guideline specifically to support clinicians in using faecal calprotectin testing to help doctors to distinguish between IBD and less serious conditions as it highlights inflammation specifically.

NICE’s role in setting standards in the diagnosis and management of a range of diseases is well known, and IBD is no exception in that regard. NICE published best practice clinical guidelines on the management of Crohn’s and colitis in 2012 and 2013 respectively. Once diagnosed, a number of treatment options are available for patients. The Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), outlined some of the related challenges and some of the treatments in which she has participated. When treating IBD, the aim is either to heal the inflammation and so reduce the symptoms, or to reduce the risk of developing complications, such as inducing remission, or to prevent flare-ups from happening in future, which is known as maintaining remission.

The routine monitoring and follow-up of patients is a key feature of the guidance on the management of Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis. It ensures that patients can access specialist care when flare-ups or relapses occur. Protocols for monitoring should be agreed locally. Various drugs are recommended by NICE and funded by the NHS, and they can help with both of those aims. Although there is currently no cure for IBD, we know that some treatments can ease symptoms and improve quality of life—we heard Members talk about a particular member of staff and bring quality-of-life issues to the fore in their speeches. Management options include drug therapy, dietary and lifestyle advice and, in severe or chronic active disease, surgery.

I turn briefly to prescriptions. In addition to medical exemption, there are extensive exemption arrangements in England, based on age and income, via various means-tested benefits. For people who need multiple prescriptions and have to pay NHS prescription charges, such as those with long-term conditions, prescription prepayment certificates are also available, and it is worth highlighting that. I take the point about the challenge of prescriptions, but not everyone is aware of them. This is the fifth year that the cost of an annual certificate has been frozen, and the third year that the cost of a three-month certificate has been frozen. Next year, both certificates will remain at £104 and £29.10 respectively. There is no limit to the number of items that can be obtained through a PPC. The annual certificate benefit anyone needing more than 12 items a year and the three-month certificate benefits anyone needing more than three items in that three-month period.

The IBD quality standard was mentioned. In general, quality standards are important in order to set out to patients, the public, commissioners and providers what a high-quality service should look like. NICE issues them, and they enable services to benchmark themselves against one another. The quality standard for IBD was published in February 2015 and contained priority statements covering important areas such as specialist assessment, drug monitoring and surgery, all of which is designed to drive improvements in IBD care. Although providers and commissioners must have regard to the quality standards in planning and delivering services, the standards themselves do not provide a comprehensive service specification and are not mandatory.

The six inflammatory bowel disease standards were published in 2013 by the IBD standards group, an independent organisation made up of a number of professional clinical organisations and the charity itself. The standards were designed to support clinicians and commissioning organisations in the development of local IBD services. If appropriate, they may be considered alongside sources of guidance such as the NICE guidelines.

A number of important issues have been raised in the debate that are very much matters for NHS England to look into. I am sure it will be really interested to hear about the challenges that have been raised in the debate, as well as about the Scottish strategy. As the shadow
Minister said, the consideration of best practice throughout the United Kingdom is often common, as are many research outcomes, not only throughout the United Kingdom, but internationally.

Some Members mentioned the importance of nurse specialists. It was lovely to hear the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) pay tribute to the specialists with whom she has dealt and the standard of care and support she has experienced. Obviously the recruitment of staff is ultimately a local matter but, again, the NICE guidance states that local services should ensure that patients with Crohn’s or ulcerative colitis have support from an IBD multidisciplinary team, which should comprise a range of experts, including dieticians, who were mentioned, and clinical nurse specialists with particular expertise and specialist interest. That MDT care is a key feature of the quality standard, which sets out what great-quality care looks like.

The shadow Minister mentioned mental health support. It is worth noting for the record that we invested more than £400 million over the previous spending review period in improving access to psychological therapies—the IAPT programme—to ensure access to talking therapies for those who need them. That includes people with long-term conditions who are suffering from anxiety and depression. Recent positive announcements include the Prime Minister announcing £1 billion to start a revolution in mental health, which is a shared interest right across the House. No one has done enough on mental health in the past, and the matter is now much more front and centre in our thoughts. As part of that announcement, £247 million has been allocated to ensure that every emergency department has mental health support. That money reaffirms the Government’s commitment to parity of esteem between mental and physical health.

Several Members quite rightly asked about toilets. As others have said, it is essentially a matter for my colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government, but I will of course draw their attention to this debate. Local authorities in England are forecast to spend just over £60 million on such services in 2015–16. It is also worth noting that more than 400 local authorities and thousands of businesses have joined the national RADAR key scheme, meaning that some 9,000 toilets in shopping centres, pubs, cafés, department stores, bus and train stations and many other locations are now listed as being accessible through the scheme. I am sure that we have all seen them in our local areas. Official RADAR keys cost about £5 and can be bought from participating local authorities or Disability Rights UK shops. While noting that initiative, we must recognise that there is always more to do in that regard.

Members quite rightly drew the House’s attention to research and the need to know more. Dealing with a disease that currently has no cure is a big challenge, and research is key. The Department of Health currently spends more than £1 billion a year on research. As for IBD, the Department’s National Institute for Health Research awarded a £1.5 million research professorship for five years from 2013 to 2018 at the University of Oxford to examine the use of molecular techniques to re-stratify Crohn’s disease, aiming to get into the detail of identifying patients amenable to new treatment approaches and to develop new therapies. The NIHR is also investing just under £1 million in a study comparing the accuracy of MRI imaging and small bowel ultrasound in assessing the extent and activity of newly diagnosed and relapsed Crohn’s disease. The final report from the study is expected to be published in September 2017, and I am sure that there will be interest in that among Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans also mentioned the IBD BioResource. It is a really exciting project that brings together the Medical Research Council and the NIHR, supporting groundbreaking studies looking at the genetics of and new treatments for IBD that have the potential to make a real difference to patients’ lives. It will undertake a major new genetic analysis based on genome sequencing, and it will keep a database of 25,000 patients with IBD.

I have tried to cover most of the points raised in the debate. I hope that I have given hon. Members a sense of the Government’s ambition to make progress on research. I again pay tribute to the charity for contributing to the research. Partnerships between Government bodies, medical research bodies and specialist charities are an important part of making progress, not least because recruiting people to studies is important, and we cannot do that without the work of the charities.

I will write to Professor Sir Bruce Keogh, the medical director of NHS England, to outline the concerns that hon. Members quite rightly drew the House’s attention to, to outline the concerns that hon. Members raised today and to ensure that he is aware of Parliament’s interest in this issue and of the challenge to the NHS that has been outlined today. I urge Crohn’s and Colitis UK, as I do all relevant stakeholders, to continue to engage with NHS England to build valuable long-term relationships. I will write to the Royal College of General Practitioners, as a number of the issues that were raised relate to it. I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans for securing today’s debate and for making such a meaningful contribution to raising awareness of this very important issue.

5.41 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Seventh Report from the Communities and Local Government Committee of Session 2014-15, on Litter and fly-tipping in England, HC 607, and the Government response, Cm 9097.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. This was the last report by the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government in the previous Parliament. It was produced in March 2015, and we then had a little wait. As we flagged up in the report, we were not sure whether the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs or the Department for Communities and Local Government was responsible for this issue. The DCLG Minister is in his place today, although we are told that this was a DEFRA responsibility. I am sure he will sort out that confusion when he has the opportunity to do so.

Once the report was produced, the attempts to reach an agreement between the Departments continued for nine months—rather a long time, given that Select Committees normally get responses from the Government in eight weeks. Obviously there was a general election, so one might reasonably have expected a Government response by, say, July. December is a long way on from July. Indeed, the Government’s response to our recommendations took so long that I expected it to contain a bombshell. I thought we might see a proposal to increase littering fines to a level that would halve the deficit overnight, or perhaps the Government were going to be so generous as to hypothecate the total revenue from tobacco taxes to local authorities to help with their work—but no, not in the end. To be fair to the Government, they agreed with many of our recommendations, and where they did not they gave explanations. There are one or two areas that we want to push them on, to see whether we can make progress. It is difficult to understand why it took so long to produce a relatively straightforward and generally acceptable response to our sensible proposals.

In the end, litter is not an issue that we tend to have massive party political debates about, and that is not how the Committee approached it. The report was unanimously accepted by the Committee, which is par for the course—that is our general approach to things. We did not have to struggle to get that agreement. There was clear evidence, and we made clear recommendations on it.

Litter matters to the public enormously. They do not necessarily want politicians to squabble about it, but it is one of the issues that is likely to be raised with us on the doorstep. People are distressed and often appalled by the inconsideration of the people who drop it without any thought of the consequences, and that they, as taxpayers, have to pay for it to be cleaned up. That money, certainly in the current circumstances, could be spent better on other services that are important to them. It is an issue that also gets raised with local councillors regularly, so it is right that we wrote a report and are having a debate about it.

There are some clear areas of agreement. We called for a national strategy, and the Government agreed. It will be interesting to see how that develops and what effect it has. We recommended a national clean-up day. The Government, perhaps anticipating that, got in before us and accepted our recommendation before we made it, so that is positive. We have a Clean for the Queen day this year, which we should all encourage community groups and individuals in our constituencies to participate in. Again, there is cross-party agreement on that: everyone believes it is a good thing for communities to do. It is just a pity that it has to be done and that people drop litter in the first place. Nevertheless, that is a positive achievement.

One of the initial problems we have in looking at litter—I am pleased that the Government accepted this; we now need to see what they do about it—is that we do not know how much there is, because there is no reasonable assessment. There is the “Local Environmental Quality Survey of England”—that is a bit of a mouthful; I hope we find a snappier title for whatever replaces it in due course—but the problem is that the surveys do one of two things. Some simply look for evidence of a particular kind of litter in an area, and then have a tick-box that says, “That litter is there”, without recording whether it is one, a dozen or 100 pieces of litter, so we do not know about the incidence. Others count the amount of litter, but do not distinguish between the type—so 100 cigarette butts are recorded as the equivalent of 100 plastic bags, even though it is pretty obvious that their environmental and visual impacts are different. The Government accepted that we need to think about how better to collect data and agreed with the recommendation in our report. We look forward to hearing how they are going to do that.

There was a disagreement—not a fundamental one—between the Committee and the Government about what the cost of litter clean-up is. We said it was somewhere between £700 million and £850 million. The Government said—I understand the logic of their explanation—that local government would need to sweep the streets anyway to clean up dust and dirt that is not due to littering. So the total cost of street sweeping is not a consequence of the litter that people drop. I accept that, but on the other hand no better figure is available. That is the only figure that the Committee had to work with.

Education is important, and we want schools and others to do their bit to encourage children. It will be great to see children out on the national Clean for the Queen day, because they can then start to appreciate the consequences of dropping litter and what dealing with it entails. Of course, however well we educate, some people will not want to listen and will carry on dropping litter. They deserve to be penalised. The Committee said that we should increase the rates for fixed penalty notices. Again, the Government agreed and are going to consult on the level they should be raised to. Personally, I think—and the Committee generally supports this—that the levels should be increased significantly. There has to be a real deterrent when people are caught littering.
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee on introducing this important debate. He mentions fixed penalty notices, which I understand can potentially lead to criminal convictions if further steps are taken. Some local authorities might be reluctant to take those steps on the basis that they might criminalise young people. Should we perhaps consider making fixed penalty notices a civil offence?

Mr Betts: That is an interesting idea. The Committee misunderstood the position—we do not always get everything absolutely right, but we try. We said that fixed penalty notices are easy because of their civil nature, but the Government corrected us and said that they are a criminal penalty. The Government should think about the hon. Gentleman's suggestion, because that is an issue. If people are fined, we want to deter them and we want a process that is easier than going through the courts to get a fine. That could be looked at without reducing the intention to deter.

The advantage of fixed penalty notices is that the money goes back to the local authority. In the past, the Committee suggested that the Government should think about allowing money from other fines to go back to local authorities. The authority bears the costs, but the fines go to the Treasury. There is a disjuncture between the revenue from fixed penalty notices, which goes to the local authority, and fines, which go to the Treasury. Could we not have a more joined-up approach so that the local authorities, which incur the cost, get the returns from any action they take?

We then looked at the types of litter and tried to distinguish between them. Cigarettes are the most littered object. The problem is that many people do not see puffing away on a cigarette and then putting it out on the floor as littering—"It's only a cigarette butt"—but it is. Cigarette butts are the most common item of litter. We had quite a discussion about that, and we were surprised when the then Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), said that the Department suggested to the Chancellor that part of any extra tax might be, especially if they are going to provide some money for the clear-up, which is a significant cost to local authorities.

Mr Betts: We had a serious look at that and received a lot of evidence. We deliberated and came to a reasonable conclusion. The Local Government Association was absolutely clear in its evidence that it is signed up to the local government declaration on tobacco control and believes that that means that the LGA and local authorities must have nothing at all to do with tobacco companies. The view is that, because of the nature of tobacco and the need to get the message across, in particular to young people, that tobacco products kill, there should be no connection at all and that the tobacco industry should not get involved with democratically elected bodies. Indeed, I understand that the national health service takes exactly the same line nationally: no connection at all.

Kevin Hollinrake: Would that also apply to chewing gum manufacturers?

Mr Betts: No, it does not, because they are not part of the same declaration, but I will come on to chewing gum in a minute, because it is a different but interesting subject.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): A sticky subject!

Mr Betts: I was just about to say it, but the hon. Member for Harrow East got in before me—I was reflecting on whether it was appropriate, but it obviously was.

It is a difficult issue, but the Committee—most of us are generally localists—decided that we understood the declaration and the LGAs' position, and that it was up to local authorities to make a decision themselves. We also said that if they did so, they should not allow themselves to be used in any way by tobacco manufacturers to gain any advantage or engage in any promotion of tobacco products—to give any impression that tobacco was okay because the companies were making a contribution towards a public service.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): A wide group of commercial companies work hard on picking up litter. The hon. Gentleman was kind enough to mention Clean for the Queen earlier. Will he join me in praising Kärcher in my constituency? The company is committed to cleaning up “grot spots” around the country—I am glad to see that none of them is represented in this room, otherwise I would have to name and shame them. A clear set of companies are willing to put their money where their mouth is when it comes to the problem of litter. Bearing in mind the caveats that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, tobacco companies could join that number.

Mr Betts: The Committee did not say that no one should engage, but we placed strong caveats on any engagement, for obvious reasons. In the end, we said it was down to local authorities to make a decision, but we also thought the Government might make a contribution from the tobacco tax levies.

The other interesting thing about our discussion on the involvement of tobacco companies was that we had two Ministers—one from the Department for Communities and Local Government and one from the Department
for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—who gave us completely different evidence. They sat and disagreed with each other in front of the Committee. We had two different political parties coming up to a general election, so perhaps collective responsibility was breaking down in the last Parliament, for reasons different from those in this Parliament.

Again, in the end we said it was down to local authorities, but we emphasised over and over again that tobacco companies should in no way be allowed to pay out money as a salve for their consciences and to show that they are okay and not really the bad guys because they are making a public contribution. They are not okay; they sell a dangerous product, which the House has recognised through legislation in a number of ways in recent years, and I think we all support that. We do not want to do anything to give the tobacco companies a way into the public's good books.

The Tobacco Manufacturers Association made the interesting suggestion that tobacco litter is not that bad because portable, fold-up ashtrays mean that people do not have to drop ash. We said, “Great! Why don’t you issue them free with all packets of cigarettes?” I have not noticed that that has happened in the months since they made that suggestion. Was it just a publicity gimmick to suggest that they are not as bad as everyone makes out? It is quite a good idea, but nothing has happened. We should encourage them to consider it again if they want to do something practical to alleviate the problem.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is speaking about tobacco companies, and I mentioned chewing gum, but my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) just reminded me of companies such as McDonald’s. Our highways are often a litter-strewn disgrace, and while there are duties under section 89 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to keep those highways clean, there is conflict between local authorities, which have the duty, and Highways England, which is required to provide protection for local authority employees for health and safety reasons. Highways England charges for that, so highways are not being kept clean—they are cleaned only occasionally when someone complains. In my constituency, the A64 is a litter-strewn disgrace that deters the tourism that my areas relies on, yet there is no joined-up thinking about how to clean the highways. Do we need to consider that as part of the national strategy to which he referred?

Mr Andrew Turner (in the Chair): Order. Interventions must be short.

Mr Betts: I understand that this is a very long road, Mr Turner.

The Committee did consider that point, and I am going to come on to fly-tipping, which often happens on highways, in addition to ordinary littering. We considered two issues about vehicles and highways. One was about the division of responsibility between local authorities picking the litter up and Highways England being responsible for safety on the highways. We suggested that responsibility for litter be transferred to Highways England after consultation. The Government said no and that they wanted to have another look at how that might work, so I will be interested to hear more details about that from the Minister. I am not saying that the Government are wrong, but we identified a problem and made a suggestion about how it could be resolved. It clearly needs a resolution, because what we have at present is unacceptable and is not working. If the Government come up with another idea, okay, but they ought to say that if their new approach does not work, they will come back and consider whether one agency should be responsible, because that is often the way to sort things out.

There is also the question of how we penalise the offence of dropping litter from cars. As I understand it, the offence is committed by the person who drops the litter, but the difficulty is that if a car whizzes past and litter comes out of it, can who dropped it be proved? The law in London is different, because the owner of the vehicle can be charged, irrespective of who throws the litter—it is for the owner to decide. The Committee suggested that that approach should apply nationally. The Government said that there was not enough evidence that the extra powers had led to an increase in fines in London, but I still urge the Minister to have a look at that option as it seems to be impossible to determine proof outside London, because if there are four people in a car and a cigarette packet or a sweet wrapper is thrown out of it, who actually threw that? We hope that the Government will consider adopting the London position.

We carefully considered the idea of taxing chewing gum to pay for the cost of clean-up. Cigarette material might be the most prevalent form of litter, but chewing gum is certainly the most difficult to clean—it is a nightmare. In the end, we said to the industry, “Look, this is the last-chance saloon. What are you going to do to help with the cost of this and the practicalities of clearing it up? Alternatively, how about producing chewing gum that is less difficult to get off the pavement if people drop it?”

The Government’s response referred to a wonderful-sounding organisation called the Chewing Gum Action Group. We hope that it is doing good work, but we would like to hear what it is going to do and how the Minister will judge its success. If, despite its work, chewing gum is still being thrown around to the same extent, with no change in the materials used in gum to make it easier to remove, and if the industry does not volunteer to take up its share of the burden, will the Minister consider alternatives? The Committee intends to reconsider the issue—and, indeed, quite a few of the points made in our report—to determine whether progress has been made.

Another big problem is fly-tipping. All the data we have, imperfect though they are, show that litter is a problem. In our report’s summary, we stated: “England is a litter-ridden country compared to most of Europe, North America and Japan.” The Government disagreed and said that there was no evidence for that, probably because the figures are not available, but most of us can see with our own eyes when we go to other countries that things there look better in general. However, it is absolutely clear that the problem of fly-tipping has become worse in this country. There is no doubt at all about that, because there has been a 20% increase in the previous 12 months, as we were told in evidence.

The Government accepted the suggestion of adopting fixed penalty notices for fly-tipping to add to the range of options for local authorities so that they may prosecute
more simply. Fly-tipping is a serious problem, but while a builders’ merchant ought to be taken to court for a major incident such as dumping building material in a lay-by, for a discarded plastic bag, a fixed penalty notice would be the appropriate and proportionate response. It is extremely welcome that the Government will introduce such notices.

A further concern is that as local authorities get increasingly short of cash and look for savings, they charge for taking away bulky household goods. We encourage local authorities to team up with charities—a number of organisations do this—that will take away the goods, recycle and reuse what they can, and then take to the council site what they cannot. I talked to the British Heart Foundation, which operates such a scheme in certain parts of the country. That excellent scheme involves the charity recycling much of the furniture—sprucing it up, putting it on display and selling it off—and, by agreement with the local authority, taking what it cannot sell free of charge to the local council site.

I wish that more local authorities were involved in such schemes, because they could then tell people, “There is no charge for your bulky items. This organisation will take them for free.” Items could be put to good use and recycled, and the scheme is good for the charity as well, because it will make some money. The Government also welcomed that suggestion, but it could be publicised further. Perhaps the Local Government Association will do something to get the information out to its members.

We also suggested that retailers that sold a good should take the old one away free of charge, with the cost perhaps being built into the original price of the item. The Government said that existing electrical regulations meant that a company selling electrical products had to provide disposal of the old product free of charge. The catch is that the company does not have to take it away free of charge—only the disposal is free. That is a loophole, because someone then still has to pay for an old product to be taken from the home. Will the Government consider toughening up that measure? Furthermore, those regulations apply only to electrical products, not to things such as beds or sofas, which can be even harder to get rid of. Will the Government try to find a way forward?

We also suggested improving information not only about littering, but about fine collection and penalty notices. The Government accepted that recommendation and will consider how to do that.

The report, which was considered and focused on the main issues, had a generally positive response from Government, but we did not get a totally satisfactory or complete response to some of the items, which I have highlighted. I hope that the Minister will address the issues that still need to be dealt with. In short, we need better stats and a sense of how we really get to grips with cigarette, chewing gum and fly-tipping problems.

Everything, of course, has to be seen against the background that local authorities face further spending cuts. As councils concentrate on absolutely vital statutory services such as adult social care, areas such as cleaning up litter are those that can suffer and experience reductions in spending. We do not want further problems. Local authorities ought to be imaginative, so we suggested that they look at the modern bins available. Nottingham City Council has a lot of bins that give the council’s control centre an indication of when they are available for collection. That means that someone does not have to be paid to go around emptying bins that are not full, as the council will respond when a bin is full, rather than having a rota for collection at certain times. Local authorities can therefore act to meet the challenge, but there are many issues for the Government as well. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.
enormous amounts of money clearing them up. I have a potential solution that is not in the report but I promote it as the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. The Government should increase the levy on cigarettes and tobacco products by about 5% above the rate of inflation every year, which would add about 37p to a pack of cigarettes, and all of that money should be dedicated to local authorities for two purposes. The first would be to ensure that they have the funding to take forward their duties on public health to aid smoking cessation and ensure that people do not start smoking in the first place. As the number of people smoking reduced, that would help to reduce litter. Secondly, and equally, local authorities could use part of the funds to clear up tobacco detritus, which includes not just cigarette butts but cigarette packets, cellophane and the other elements in the packs of tobacco that cause littering problems.

We also know that when people see litter around, they are less likely to feel that they should not throw litter to join that on the ground. If local authorities clear up the tobacco butts, which tend to accumulate in certain areas—particularly around stations, bus stops and other buildings—and then blow everywhere, people will be less likely to deposit other items of litter. That is a particular consequence.

On chewing gum, I am of the strong view that when people have finished chewing their gum, they deposit it where they like. In fact, only this morning I was in a Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had where they like. In fact, only this morning I was in a Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why Committee Room where some pleasant individual had deposited their chewing gum under the table. Why I thought I might get an intervention. Bob Blackman: I think my hon. Friend for that. Encouraging good habits at a young age is definitely the way forward. One of the problems in my local area is the fast food restaurant near the school: we see from the litter how long it takes young people to eat their food as they walk back to the school. They deposit it where they choose and the consequences are littered streets and concerned residents. Even worse, some young people throw it in someone's garden. They think, “I’ve finished with this. What do I do with it? I’ll throw it in the garden.”

On numerous occasions I have told my local authority to provide litter bins on the routes between schools and the fast food restaurants. I remember an exchange with some officers who said, “We’re not going to do that, because the consequence is the litter bins will become full and then we’ll have to pay someone to empty them.” We might think, “Hang on a minute, surely it is cheaper to do that than to clear up the litter,” but logic did not prevail in that case. I think there is a semblance of a duty—we took a lot of evidence on this—for fast food restaurants to keep the place clean.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees that not all fast food outlets operate with the same disregard. In my constituency, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, McDonald’s is good. It employs people to clean up around its restaurants and it organises volunteer days for its staff to do my local park. Some fast food chains take a responsible approach to the matter.

Victoria Prentis: Does my hon. Friend agree that a child who is encouraged to pick up litter in a scheme such as Clean for the Queen grows up to be an adult who does not throw litter? That is very much part of the impetus behind our push for such schemes.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I also believe in the importance of educating young people. I strongly support the Clean for the Queen programme, which is an excellent programme, among others—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) will promote other aspects of taking action in particular areas. That is a great thing to do. We need to educate young people in particular about the importance of not littering on their streets.

Victoria Prentis: Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

Bob Blackman: I thought I might get an intervention on that point.
drop them out of their car windows—for local residents to suffer. Surely we can ensure that the fast food restaurants have a duty to keep their areas clear. I leave the implementation of that to the great thoughts of my hon. Friend the Minister, but we must say, “The consequences of you selling your products are the costs of clearing up.” Let us look at some solutions to that.

Mr Betts: I did not cover this point in my introduction, but the hon. Gentleman is right. My Committee gave specific praise to McDonald’s because of what it does and said all fast food restaurants, takeaways and so on should have a legal responsibility to clean up in their areas. The Government came back and said that they did not want a general duty, but that local authorities have powers to act under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 where there is a persistent problem. I wonder whether many local authorities use that power; I am not sure if figures are kept about that. Going down that route presumably has quite a considerable cost for local authorities. Does the hon. Gentleman think we ought to push the Government a little bit harder, to see what we can effectively do about this?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman who chairs the Select Committee. We have to press the Government further on this issue, and we will clearly return to it in this term. If the Government do not take action, we will as a Committee almost certainly conclude that further action is required. If the Government do not come up with a scheme, we will suggest an alternative.

Another area of social change in this country is that we are shifting to a lot more people living in private rented accommodation. People quite frequently live in such accommodation for short periods of six months to one year and then move to another area, which may involve moving from one local authority to another. That has consequences.

As a true localist, I applaud local authorities collecting domestic rubbish as they so choose. However, if we go to any London borough or any local authority up and down the country, we will find different coloured bins for different types of waste—be it general waste, dry recycled waste, food waste or garden waste. In some local authorities, there are five different bins, all with different colours. No information is supplied to individuals living in households in the area as to which rubbish they should put in which bin, except when the local authority issues the bins.

The problem is that when people move, they may then put rubbish in the wrong bins, and it is particularly people who come from another country to live in this country—I am not blaming them for this. They want to do the right thing: they want to dispose of their rubbish. They put the rubbish in the bin that they think is the right one. They may have moved from one local authority to another, so they just use the same colour bin. However, when the rubbish comes to be collected, the bin men arrive and say, “Nope. It’s the wrong rubbish in the wrong bin,” and just leave it there and move on to the next house.

As a consequence, the bins rapidly fill up and overflow, causing rats, mice and other vermin to congregate. Worse still, particularly in shared households, what tends to happen is that people say, “I’ve got to get rid of my rubbish. What am I going to do with it?” The local authority hasn’t collected my bin and hasn’t told me why. What I’ll do is put my rubbish in a plastic bag, wander down to the end of the road and deposit it on the corner.” Rats, foxes, dogs, cats and all sorts of vermin then chew the bags and the rubbish goes everywhere.

My suggestion is relatively simple. When someone moves into private rented accommodation, one of their duties is to register on the electoral register with the local authority. Surely local authorities should have a duty to issue people who move into the area and register for the first time with a simple guide to how to dispose of rubbish. It is not rocket science but, to my knowledge, that is not done anywhere in the country. Some enlightened places may do it, but the reality is that it is not generally happening. It would be so easy to do. It could be one sheet that goes out when someone registers to vote, saying, “Here’s advice on how you dispose of your rubbish.” At a stroke, we would remove quite a few of the problems that occur with fly-tipping. From what I can see, a lot of fly-tipping is a consequence of people not getting their domestic waste collected.

Another associated problem is that many local authorities are now choosing to charge for the collection of garden waste. I remember introducing wheelie bins for the first time in my local authority when I was a local authority leader. We had a great song and dance about it—“Throw all your rubbish in the bin. It’ll be collected once a week and we’ll sort it out for recycling and other purposes.” It was a great idea. For the first time, garden waste was collected, free of charge. The problem is that as local authorities then separated out the various different types of service, they cottoned on to the fact that they do not have to collect garden waste free of charge. They therefore then imposed a charge on collecting garden waste, which is deeply unpopular and is a monopoly service, because no one else provides it.

The reality is that the charges are very different depending on where they are in the country. I have done a study demonstrating that in London my own borough, which is introducing the charge from April, will have the highest level. That is a deterrent straight away to people registering for the service. People who have gardens and are therefore likely to generate garden waste will dispose of their garden waste somehow. One problem with the charge is that those people will say, “Actually, I’m not prepared to pay for a service that I think should be provided by the local authority free of charge”—and has been, by the way, for a number of years—“so I’ll find another way of disposing of it.” Fly-tipping will become more prevalent as a result.

It is certainly true that where charges have been imposed, fly-tipping of garden waste in particular has increased quite dramatically. That is a consequence of charging for services that people see as part of the council tax they pay. The Government need to look at that carefully. I take the view that the charges for such services should be kept under review, because it cannot be correct that equivalent authorities are charging very different prices for the same service. Something is going wrong somewhere when that is the case.

Mr Betts: I understand the problem. It certainly caused a great deal of concern in my constituency when charges were introduced. The problem was that it is not
the council that introduced the charge; it is Veolia, the contractor. Veolia fixes the charge and refuses to take instalment payments, so people have to pay it up front. That is a deterrent to people, particularly those on low incomes. There is a challenge when contractors—ones that make a lot of money out of this—introduce that sort of charge for the service.

Bob Blackman: That is a clear concern. It depends, of course, on the contract that has been set up between the local authority and the supplier. In London—I cannot speak for the hon. Gentleman’s area—we have done quite a detailed study of this issue, and it is local authorities implementing the charges, not contractors. In my borough, it is a direct service—it is not even being provided by an outside contractor, which demonstrates that there is a particular problem.

Jim Fitzpatrick: To reinforce the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), there was a perversity when bulk refuse charges were introduced in Tower Hamlets, in that the concerned citizens who were reporting bulk refuse were the ones being told, “You have to pay the charge for the removal of that piece of bulk refuse,” even though it had been fly-tipped by somebody from somewhere else. Tower Hamlets had to go back to free collection of bulk refuse, because otherwise citizens would not report it out of fear that they would have to pay for the removal of something that was not their responsibility.

Bob Blackman: I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s point. That has happened in a lot of local authorities up and down the country.

I will move on to bulky waste, to which the Chair of the Select Committee also alluded. There are duties for certain items to be collected when someone buys a replacement, but I think we will all have seen beds, sofas, garden furniture and ordinary furniture just dumped on the streets and left to rot. The reality is that much of that, and mattresses in particular, could be collected at the same time as people are buying new ones. I have seen certain local authorities that routinely go around and collect mattresses that have been left in particular areas. In areas with houses in multiple occupation, landlords will turn out the beds on a routine basis, especially when there has been a turnover of people living in those properties. When there are mattresses on the street, they have to be collected and dealt with. Surely there should be a duty on suppliers, as part and parcel of the process of delivering mattresses, sofas and other items, to collect and take away the old ones and dispose of them free of charge to the individual who is buying the new product. The Government should look at that in order to reduce costs.

The other issue with fly-tipping is that it is definitely on the increase. We have to combat it in every way, shape or form. Two types of fly-tipping are of particular concern. There is fly-tipping on the public highway, which hon. Members have mentioned, along with fly-tipping on street corners and all sorts of areas of the public highway that tend to be out of sight. People just wander along and either dump their rubbish from a car or, alternatively, dump it on service roads, whether to shops or domestic properties, as access points to garages. They are often the biggest problem of all, for the simple reason that they are on private land, so local authorities will say, “Nothing to do with us; you have to pay for that rubbish to be removed,” whereas residents say, “Well, it’s nothing to do with us. We didn’t dump it there in the first place.” The rubbish then builds up and up, till it becomes a health hazard and finally the local authority has to step in, remove it and try and identify who was responsible. It is often good luck if they find anything associated with the individual who dumped it in the first place. Often that is not possible.

I suspect this will be difficult, but we will have to look at what the duties are to collect fly-tipping on private land and whether any can be passed on to local authorities or whether there is some other way of dealing with fly-tipping on service roads. I know this is of great concern to many residents up and down the country, and there do not seem to be proper regulations to control it.

Mr Betts: To deter fly-tipping, we said we wanted to see powers to impound vehicles engaged in fly-tipping. One very positive thing that we probably ought to report—and, again, congratulate the Government on—is that they brought those regulations into force on 6 April. That was really welcome. In serious cases, a vehicle engaged in fly-tipping can be impounded and taken away, which is a really strong penalty and deterrent.

Bob Blackman: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee again for making that point about a good thing that the Government have done.

All in all, this is a comprehensive report, with some simple recommendations about which most right-minded people would say, “Well, let’s implement those.” There are some dilemmas for the Government in their deliberations on fly-tipping and littering, but I would welcome the Minister’s views on how some of the ideas we have floated today can be taken forward and implemented across the country, while allowing local authorities to develop new strategies to deal with fly-tipping and littering as appropriate in their local communities. It is also about making it clear that there are duties to keep areas clean and duties on individuals to ensure that they do not dump rubbish and act in an antisocial manner.

In conclusion, it was a pleasure to work on this report. It upsets most residents across the country to see rubbish thrown everywhere. Clearly this is an area where a clean-up is necessary.
Government’s response. I only picked that up when he commented about it in his opening remarks, and that is of interest in itself. I also read the Government response to the report with interest. I thank Allison Ogden-Newton, the chief executive of Keep Britain Tidy, Rosalind Finney, the public affairs manager of the Marine Conservation Society, and Ms Pat Wharton, who leads the British Cleaning Council, for their briefings to help me to pull together some of my comments.

I should declare that I was previously a Minister of State at DEFRA and responsible for Keep Britain Tidy—I will come on to recommendation 20 in the report in a minute. I am also now, having taken over from the predecessor of the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), chair of the Tidy Britain all-party group, of which he is an active member, as is the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis). Perhaps the hon. Member for Harrow East will want to join us as well in due course.

I will mention a few aspects of the key issues raised by those who sent me briefings, although I will not detain colleagues for long. A national litter strategy has been raised by Keep Britain Tidy, and the Committee’s report mentions that in recommendation 20, which opens up by saying:

“The failure to make a noticeable improvement in litter levels in the last 12 years points to a lack of vigour, if not complacency, within Government over the past decade.”

Well, I take my part of the responsibility for that and apologise to the Select Committee for not satisfying it in its analysis of where different Governments have been on this issue. It is obvious from the speech made by the Chair of the Committee and the report that this is not a party political issue. We have all failed the country and we all need to do better. The Select Committee has pointed the way and the Government are clearly accepting some of its advice.

The report goes on to refer to a point that was raised with me by Keep Britain Tidy:

“We recommend that the Government create a national litter strategy for England with a clear framework for action. This must be underpinned with a coordinating role for local councils within their respective areas.”

Paragraph 50 of the Government response states:

“We will therefore seek to work with local government and relevant stakeholders to develop a national Litter Strategy.”

If the Minister forgives me for saying so, that does sound a little weak in terms of urgency, but I am sure that he will give us a positive explanation.

Victoria Prentis: One thing that I, for one, would like to see embedded in the national litter strategy is an annual spring clean. While that might not always be called Clean for the Queen, does the hon. Gentleman agree that something along the lines of GB Tidy—Get Britain Tidy—would be a way forward?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Get Britain Tidy gives more motivation than Keep Britain Tidy, because I think we all recognise that there are many areas in the country—she referred to some earlier—that are not up to the standard that we would want. She therefore makes a sensible suggestion. The Government’s announcement regarding 21 March very much goes in that direction and it will be interesting to hear from the Minister whether this will be an annual event in due course.

Keep Britain Tidy also stated that the suspension of the national litter survey is a problem. When the strategy does come forward—it is due by 2018—the latest data to use as a benchmark against it will be three or perhaps even four years old, so we are losing the ability to identify where we are against where we want to be, which will make things difficult.

I commend my local authority of Tower Hamlets which, like every local authority, is trying to deal with the problem, but experiencing great difficulty. One initiative it introduced recently, which other local authorities have also introduced, was to give every bin in the borough an identification mark so that people could use a smartphone to take a picture of a full bin with its bar code, which would automatically alert the local authority that the bin is full and should be emptied. It will be well worth noting how effective this brand-new method will be, but it is a recent technology that may help because when people are using bins that they should not be using, for whatever reason, the local authority can be notified that something needs to be done.

The Marine Conservation Society has asked whether beach and aquatic litter will be included in the survey, when it emerges. In response to previous inquiries, the Government have claimed that the marine strategy framework directive covers this issue, but the MCS says that the directive’s only measure on litter covers plastic bags, which are only one aspect of litter on beaches and in aquatic areas. Will the Minister say whether more types of litter could be included?

The second main item raised by Keep Britain Tidy, which is covered by recommendations 2, 13 and 14 of the Committee’s report, is the cost of litter and the success or otherwise of fixed penalty notices, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East. The key issues raised included the need for accurate collation of data and an analysis of the success or otherwise of such efforts. The Government response to the Committee’s recommendation—I am paraphrasing—said that the matter was noted, so it is not clear which way the Government will go. That does not deal with the question of whether fixed penalty notices are successful, or how much more successful they may be in due course.

The key point from Keep Britain Tidy, MCS, the British Cleaning Council and the Select Committee, which has already come through during the debate, is about messaging. Local authorities are doing their best, but we need a sense of national urgency regarding litter—the hon. Member for Banbury talked about this—because we all know that, compared with a lot of other countries, many parts of Britain are embarrassing and we must do better.

The Government should be commended, as the Select Committee does in recommendation 21, on national clean-up day on 21 March. We need national momentum, so that clean-up day, like Clean for the Queen, is to be commended. The hon. Lady recently held an excellent event in the Jubilee Room to promote Clean for the Queen and to spread the message to parliamentary colleagues, so she should be commended on her efforts.
Notwithstanding whether we have national initiatives such as Clean for the Queen, many local groups are active in this area. The hon. Lady cited one of her constituents and my favourite in my constituency is the 2nd East London scout group, which goes out regularly to clean areas in the constituency, dragging parents, relatives, MPs and others along to help. That is a fantastic example of the sort of educational start to life that we want to see mirrored among all our young people.

Keep Britain Tidy raised two further issues with me: tobacco and litter from vehicles. The Select Committee spent quite a lot of time on these matters, as its Chair outlined, and that is reflected in recommendations 5, 16, 17 of the report. The Government and many local authorities—the Minister will tell me whether I am wrong—seem to duck the tobacco question because while tobacco causes damage to the human body, the Government do not seem to want to face up to the tobacco companies. My hon. Friend said there might be a way of using their financial power through such methods as the tax levy that the hon. Member for Harrow East mentioned. Their product causes the difficulty, so they should have some responsibility, with consumers of that product, to deal with it. Recommendation 5 in the Select Committee report addresses that point.

The Select Committee commented on litter from vehicles in recommendation 16. Paragraph 35 of the Government’s response says:

“A regional working group, through the Keep Britain Tidy Network of local authorities and other stakeholders, will ensure that a strategic approach to preventing litter can be achieved.”

Keep Britain Tidy has told me that clarity in the legislation would be great, but it seems that there is more work to do. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton spoke about using a civil penalty rather than a criminal penalty to make the option of levying fines, especially on young drivers, more attractive to local authorities, which might not want to criminalise young people early in their lives for an offence that is serious in terms of the environment, but more of a misdemeanour compared with many criminal offences, even though it should be punished.

The Marine Conservation Society feel that beaches and aquatic issues have not been given sufficient attention. Keep Britain Tidy supports several of the Select Committee’s conclusions. The Committee set out a number of questions and points of concern, and it has clearly done an excellent job in raising this important issue, highlighting weaknesses, identifying points of concern, making recommendations and promoting a more strategic framework.

The Government response is slightly defensive, which goes back to the Select Committee’s criticism of all Governments over the past 12 years. Perhaps we could and should do more, but given austerity and the economic situation, the Government naturally believe that resources may not be available. The issue involves the fabric of our country, however, and investment to deal with litter could have a positive effect in many different ways.

I will end on a positive note. Keep Britain Tidy reports that Clean for the Queen, the initiative that the hon. Member for Banbury brought to the House, has been signed up to by more than 200 local authorities and 60,000 volunteers. There will be 1,000 events, so it is already a success, even though it has not happened yet. I am sure the Government’s national clean-up day on 21 March will be a success, and we look forward to leadership on that from the Minister and the shadow Minister.

The Select Committee says that the Government need to become more serious about the matter. That is very much the case, and if they set an example by getting serious, I am sure that the country will respond. I am grateful to the Committee for bringing the report to our attention.

2.37 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I thank the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)—before he leaves the Chamber—for his contribution, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), and the hon. Members for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) and for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) who, I am pleased to say, are remaining in their place. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, for his eloquent introduction to this debate and for highlighting these important issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse outlined clearly some of the Select Committee’s recommendations, but you will be pleased to hear, Mr Turner, that I do not intend simply to repeat what has already been said.

Litter and fly-tipping have been, and remain, a huge problem in this country. They are a blight on England—on our roadsides, public areas and public spaces. Unfortunately, cuts to local government funding are forcing many councils to make savings by closing municipal tips, which could increase fly-tipping. The closure of the local tip in Heywood in my constituency led to great concern among residents, many of whom contacted me to share their worries that such action would exacerbate the growing problem of fly-tipping.

I welcome the Select Committee’s recommendation on penalties for fly-tipping. The introduction of a fixed penalty notice for the fly-tipping of household items, which form the bulk of the incidents, would involve the lower standard of proof required for a civil penalty. I also welcome the recommendation, to which many hon. Members have referred, that the relevant industries introduce a scheme to take away unwanted household appliances and furniture when replacements are delivered. Additionally, it is vital that councils foster partnerships with charities that are willing to collect such items free of charge, as many councils do. Just because an item is being replaced, that does not make it obsolete, and there are many excellent local charities that will find good homes for appliances and furniture that are still usable.

As many hon. Members pointed out, incidences of fly-tipping are on the increase. I am concerned that that is being exacerbated not only by councils operating fewer municipal tip sites, but by some councils, again in response to cuts in central Government funding, introducing charging for items and waste deposited at those sites. We are in a bit of a quagmire. The Government want local councils to become self-financing by 2020 and are encouraging innovation to enable them to generate their own funding. Many councils will see charging for waste disposal as a method of income generation, but it
must not be forgotten that that in itself could lead to an increase in fly-tipping. The hon. Member for Harrow East made a similar and very valid point in relation to councils charging for the removal of garden waste.

That is why I welcome the Select Committee’s recommendation to introduce a national fixed penalty notice for small amounts of fly-tipping, which would require the lower standard of proof required for a civil penalty. I welcome the Government’s commitment to give councils the power to tackle small-scale fly-tipping through penalty notices, as an alternative to prosecutions.

The Select Committee rightly points out that no data on incidences of litter are held centrally by the Government. I am pleased that the Government appear to welcome the idea of having access to those data and, importantly, that they say:

“we will explore ways of obtaining it without imposing an additional reporting burden on local authorities.”

I fully support the Government’s sentiment. Although they appear to be expecting local councils to do more and more with less and less, it is vital that we try not to impose additional burdens on our already hard-pressed councils. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East highlighted the long period of time between publication of the Select Committee report and receipt of the Government response, so I hope that the Minister can offer some explanation for that.

Litter is of great concern to our constituents, and it is right that the Government should be taking positive action. I am a great supporter of, and have participated in many, community clean-ups and litter-picks. I applaud the idea of a community clean-up day. Clean for the Queen has been referred to. Personally, I would prefer a clean for the community day, although in an ideal world, no one would drop litter and community groups could spend their time on activities that really do improve their local areas, such as bulb and flower planting.

The issue of cigarette litter was highlighted by the hon. Member for Harrow East. There is a real job to be done of educating smokers. Many of them seem to think that cigarette butts are biodegradable, but they are not—once dropped, they remain very much fixed until they are cleared away. I feel that a portion of the tobacco tax should go towards the cost of street cleaning to local councils, but I fully appreciate councils’ sensitivities about being seen to be endorsing tobacco companies in any way. I will be interested in the Minister’s comments on that.

Bob Blackman: Will the hon. Lady comment on the solution that I raised—a tobacco duty escalator? The money would be passed on to local authorities so that they could fulfil their duties, and that would have the benefit that local authorities would not need to have anything to do with the tobacco industry, although they would be given the money that was raised.

Liz McInnes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those comments. The Government’s response says that they will leave it up to local councils to decide whether they wish to work with tobacco companies. That is a sensible way of dealing with the matter, but personally I do not have an issue with tobacco companies putting in funding to clear up the litter that their users create, which does not show the tobacco companies in an especially positive light. An escalator could be one way of dealing with the situation, but I appreciate that other hon. Members have different views, so I would be interested to hear what the Minister has to say.

I am in danger of doing what I said I would not do—repeating all the points that everyone has made—but the report makes valid points. I have not yet touched on the responsibilities of chewing gum manufacturers and fast food companies. The Select Committee is not yet recommending a tax on chewing gum, but it does say that,

“this is the last chance for the industry to put its house in order.”

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East, I was quite entertained by the idea of the Chewing Gum Action Group, but behind that name there is some serious work to be done, including perhaps more information on packaging about how chewing gum should be disposed of—and not in the time-honoured tradition of sticking it under the school desk. I am really disappointed to hear that that practice goes on in this place as well. There is a job of education to be done not just among schoolchildren but, unfortunately, among some people here.

We have to see the situation of litter and fly-tipping against the background of cuts to local council funding, but I hope that the report’s positive recommendations can be accepted and acted on in an amicable, cross-party manner. This issue affects all our constituents, regardless of our political persuasion. As my hon. Friend said, many of the recommendations have been taken on board by the Government, and I hope that the Minister will now comment on those areas highlighted during the debate as still requiring more work and consideration.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I thank the Communities and Local Government Committee for its report on litter and fly-tipping and thank the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and other hon. Members for an excellent debate. It is one of those debates that is relatively unusual in the House, in that it is on a party manner. This issue affects all our constituents, regardless of our political persuasion. As my hon. Friend said, many of the recommendations have been taken on board by the Government, and I hope that the Minister will now comment on those areas highlighted during the debate as still requiring more work and consideration.

Littering and fly-tipping cause great concern to residents, councils and this Government. They are antisocial environmental crimes that pose risks to human health and animal welfare, spoil relationships between neighbours and their wider community, and affect the way people feel about the place that they call home. There is evidence that high levels of litter can restrict the economic growth of an area, reduce property prices and increase residents’ fear of crime. For local authorities, it is also a significant issue. It costs them hundreds of millions of pounds every year to clear litter and illegally dumped waste from our streets and public spaces. As far as this Government are concerned, they should not have to do that. Litter and fly-tipping are avoidable problems. It is simply not right that the behaviour of a selfish minority ends up blighting our landscapes while imposing costs on landowners and local taxpayers. A change in our
culture is needed to get Britain back to the “green and pleasant land” that we are so renowned for across the globe.

This is about personal responsibility, which means consciously not littering, even when it is mildly inconvenient to dispose of our rubbish properly. Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching. Of course there are practical ways in which the Government can help. We welcome the Select Committee’s report and agree with many of its recommendations to combat the problems of litter and fly-tipping.

Local authorities are at the heart of our communities. They deliver front-line services to the public and are vital in meeting the challenge of eradicating litter and fly-tipping. Although litter and fly-tipping are clearly problems, the majority of local authorities can be commended for the fact that they are consistent in maintaining standards. In many cases, that has even been the case during a difficult period in which local government has had to do more with less, which does not make the Government at all complacent in its determination to reduce litter and fly-tipping. We need to clean up and change people’s culture, values and attitude to their environments.

This should not be a top-down approach. The Government are committed to localism and the transfer of power to local communities to deal with litter and fly-tipping problems, which require a local approach tailored to the characteristics of the area and the community in which the problems occur. Life the rest of the public sector, local authorities have worked hard over the last five years, but they still need to be thinking innovatively about how they can make litter and fly-tipping-related savings while protecting existing street cleansing services and standards.

The Chair of the Select Committee mentioned the work in Nottingham. The same has been happening in Bath and North East Somerset, where they use Bigbelly smart bins, which are electronic-type bins that tell the council when they are full. Bath and North East Somerset Council estimates that the way the bins work—the council goes out to empty them only when they need to be emptied—has saved 390 labour hours a month, which is a significant saving. I would like more local authorities to take the same sort of lead as Nottingham City Council, and Bath and North East Somerset Council. Many councils are putting in a significant amount of money. There have been a number of different estimates of that money, but we think they are probably putting about £700 million a year into dealing with litter.

As the Chair of the Select Committee mentioned, there is pressure on the provision of social care, bearing in mind that the population is getting older, yet it is important to point out that while growing old is inevitable, littering and fly-tipping are not. In the end there is a choice, and I would much rather that councils were able very easily to make the choice to put additional money into social care provision, rather than having to put so much money into the problem of litter and fly-tipping.

The Government still have a role to play, because no matter how good and innovative councils become, they need the support and the backing of the Government to tackle the problem. During the Select Committee inquiry, they agreed that their role was to enable local action in three ways: setting clear overall standards for cleanliness, ensuring legal powers to enable councils to take effective action, and ensuring that costs can be passed to those responsible for causing the problem. Our immediate priorities to achieve this will deliver on our manifesto commitments to review the case for increasing the fines for littering offences and to allow local authorities to tackle small-scale fly-tipping through fixed penalties as an alternative to prosecutions. That is something that a number of hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), have raised today, and I am glad that there is significant support for that approach.

We want to work with local government and relevant stakeholders to develop a national litter strategy. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) was a little concerned about the wording in the Select Committee report, but I reassure him that we want a robust strategy to deal with litter and fly-tipping. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), and I are absolutely focused on trying to achieve a robust litter strategy and we are working very closely to do so. We want a strategy that will enable effective and co-ordinated anti-litter work across England, focusing on affordable and measurable ways to change behaviour, reduce litter and improve the local environment. That is a priority for our communities, which deserve a lasting legacy of clutter-free towns and cities, and a countryside of which we can all be proud.

We have already begun to work with producers of commonly littered items, major retailers, some of the leading charities and NGOs in the sector, and local councils. We need to do more with those organisations to ensure that we really get to grips with and tackle the problem. In addition to those immediate priorities, the Government have agreed with the Committee’s recommendation to try to make a national litter-pick an annual event.

I am delighted that so much publicity has been given to the Clean for the Queen event. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton and I have not disagreed on much, but personally I think that Clean for the Queen is a fantastic statement for us to make. However, we should not split too many hairs. The point is that on 3, 4 and 5 March, we will all come together as communities up and down the country, supporting each other to clean up those areas. I encourage any hon. Members who are not already signed up to a clean-up on that weekend to get involved. It is great to see so many hon. Members involved, and it was good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) here. She has done a lot with Keep Britain Tidy over the past few weeks to encourage hon. Members to get involved.

I note the comments of the Chairman of the Select Committee about the time it took for the Government to respond to the report. I apologise for the delay. I regret that we did not reply within a more reasonable timeframe. He acknowledged that the report was released very shortly before the purdah period and the ensuing general election, and I think he mentioned that the report cuts across several Departments. It actually cuts across many Government Departments and, although our response was positive, it was not provided as quickly as usually would be the case. I hope he takes my comments in the spirit in which they are intended.
The hon. Gentleman mentioned data. That is a hugely important point. We are certainly working with an advisory group. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse mentioned Keep Britain Tidy, which is part of that advisory group alongside a number of other important organisations in the area. We are trying to bring forward a package to ensure that we collect the necessary data so that the work of our litter and fly-tipping strategy is measured in relation to its success.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East mentioned fixed penalty notices, which I assure him we are carefully considering. Fixed penalty notices should be a last resort, but they are an extremely important enforcement tool in the box to make people think twice about dropping litter. We are carefully considering what we can do to increase penalties to ensure that fixed penalty notices are a significant deterrent. We will not impose additional penalties without properly consulting the public first, which is right.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned smoking litter, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—I will address his points in a moment. I agree with what the Chair of the Select Committee says about that problem. He mentioned a tobacco levy, on which the Government consulted last year. It is obvious from that consultation that if we put any sort of levy on the tobacco companies, they would pass it straight on to the end user, which we have to take seriously. Effectively, he is looking to levy an additional tax on tobacco and cigarettes that would come back to the Treasury and, through my Department, go directly to local authorities to address some of these issues. It is slightly above my pay grade to make such commitments—it is an issue for the Treasury.—but his point is on the record.

Mr Betts: I was nodding across the room to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) when the Minister said that the levy would be passed on to smokers. Ultimately, they are the ones who drop the litter. A little contribution from them towards local authority costs does not seem completely unreasonable, does it?

Mr Jones: I will only say that there would be an additional cost to end users, who already contribute significant amounts to the Treasury in taxation. When that money comes into the Treasury, some of it goes to local authorities in relation to their duties. Some of that money, by implication, must be spent on addressing the problem. I am not suggesting that the points the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East are making should never be considered, but they are taxation matters, which should be considered carefully by the Treasury.

Mr Betts: I will take the Minister a little further down that road into areas that he probably does not want to go into. When we get to 2019-20 and the full localisation of business rates, there will not be any Treasury contribution towards local authorities from tobacco tax or any other form of tax. Would that not be a different situation, in which there might be a need to reconsider whether there should be some Treasury contribution from tobacco tax towards the clean-up of tobacco litter?

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman is tempting me down a path that I will certainly not tread, but in a moment, in response to questions asked by hon. Members, I will cover a pertinent point about the full retention of business rates.

Bob Blackman: I thank the Minister for his remarks; I am interjecting on two points. First, the cost to the national health service of smoking-related diseases is greater than the Treasury’s income from tobacco products, so the position is not balanced. Secondly, local authorities have a public duty to encourage smoking cessation and to clear up the litter caused by smoking. The issue is how they get that funding, particularly at a time when the Government have chosen to reduce funding for public health. The proposed levy is therefore a way of providing local authorities with more money to fulfil their duties.

Mr Jones: As I have said, these are matters for the Treasury. My hon. Friend has got his point on the record today, and I am sure Treasury Ministers will be listening intently to this debate and will therefore have heard what he has said.

My hon. Friend made some interesting comments about finding chewing gum under a desk. I decided to take a pair of shoes back to my home in my constituency this weekend, and when I put them in my bag this morning there was a great big piece of chewing gum on the bottom of them. As he would expect, I was not best pleased. I appreciate exactly what he says about the challenges we face with chewing gum. The Chewing Gum Action Group has been mentioned, and its work was perhaps understated. That important group is working to address these issues. The companies that produce chewing gum are members of the group. It is important that the Government engage with those companies to ensure that we are doing all we can and that they are showing and taking a lead on ensuring that their products do not end up on pavements and floors across the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned highways. There is a pilot project in the midlands that aims to enhance joint working between Highways England and local authorities, with the aim of sharing teams and assets so that they can support each other to improve our A roads across the midlands. We are carefully looking at how that is currently working. Making the Highways Agency legally responsible for collecting litter is not as straightforward as has been said—primary legislation and complicated alterations to funding arrangements would be needed. It is important that we see how the pilot pans out before taking it forward.

The idea of fines for throwing litter from cars has been mentioned, and again we will carefully consider it through the national litter strategy and enforcement. We are well aware of the problem, and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East mentioned instances where people get takeaway food and drive up the road, with the rubbish ending up in a hedge, in the bushes or in somebody’s garden. That is an important point, and it is something that we need to consider carefully.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East mentioned the LGA, which has an extremely important role in this agenda. The LGA is part of our advisory group, and it
will be an important organisation in getting across some of the messages that we need to get across to local authorities. Many comments have been made about reductions in spending, and obviously I am well aware of the challenges faced by local government. Those challenges have been managed extremely well over the past five years, for which I thank local government, but there is a critical point here. I mentioned earlier in my remarks that the issue is not just about the environment—the possible damage to wildlife and the fact that an area might look scruffy. It is a massive issue for local economies, because when an area is scruffy it is an indicator that the economy might not be doing as well as it could.

To return to the point made by the Chairman of the Select Committee about full retention of business rates, which will happen by the end of this decade, I think that all local authorities will look to raise additional business rate. Other funding streams for councils that are becoming more and more important are additional council tax, widening the council tax base and the new homes bonus. It is absolutely in every council’s interest to ensure that it is doing its utmost to keep its area clean, tidy and free of fly-tipping for that reason alone. Effectively, it will become an investment to bring in additional revenue for councils.

I heard what the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton said about household recycling centres, which several other Members mentioned as well. It is encouraging to see many councils working with charities that collect items, even from people’s homes. It is extremely positive when items coming into recycling sites go straight into shops right next to the site; I have a very good example of that in my constituency. Goods go on sale that many people on lower incomes can easily access, and it reduces the prevalence of litter and fly-tipping.

On the point about household recycling centres and municipal tips, as the hon. Member called them—that is the term that I have always used; in my local area we say “going up the tip”—and on the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East about councils charging for recycling of green waste and so on, it is obviously a decision for the local authority in question whether it wants to charge people to use a household recycling centre or to dispose of green waste. However, having experienced local government myself, I would say that those are services that local people expect to be provided, and they are concerned about it. As I said, in terms of the context of the change in how local government will be funded, I think that councils that do not think carefully about providing those services will meet challenges going forward in terms of generating the important income streams that they need.

Bob Blackman: When the Secretary of State came before the Committee to discuss these issues, we raised the point about monopoly services for which local authorities charge. We need to balance the cost of providing those services against the price that the local authority charges for those services. Given the wide disparity, will the Minister go back to his Department with the view that we need to review what is happening across local authorities to see whether there is any element of overcharging and profiting from such services that is then being used to subsidise other services?

Mr Jones: That is certainly a consideration that we have made in relation to other services controlled by local authorities, such as car parking. I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I would certainly be interested to hear any examples from hon. Members’ constituencies, if the type of practice that he described is going on to the detriment of local people.

I think that I have covered many of the comments made by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse. I welcome the initiative in Tower Hamlets and how the council is changing its thinking about emptying bins. It is halfway to the work being done in Nottingham and in Bath and North East Somerset. However, it is welcome to see a council looking differently at how it provides services and trying to innovate.

I was also encouraged to hear what the hon. Gentleman said about his local scout groups. It is important to get younger people involved in this agenda. Again, I think that we should consider it in terms of the litter strategy. My local scout groups have been very supportive. I have done a number of clean-ups in my constituency, including a river clean-up where the scouts came in canoes and helped clean out the river that runs through my constituency. Many young people are making a positive contribution in that way.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The Minister has covered the vast majority of points that I made. The only one on which I would press him is the Marine Conservation Society comment about the inclusion of marine, beach and aquatic venues in the national strategy. I volunteer with Thames21, which does fantastic work cleaning up the Thames, and the Government support it hugely. A lot of the litter is plastic bags, but obviously there is more to litter in those environments than just plastic bags. Can he assure us that marine, beach and aquatic environments will be incorporated into the national strategy?

Mr Jones: We are considering carefully all different environments. Although some people have not been as positive about it as others, I think that the charge on plastic bags has reduced plastic bag usage significantly, by an estimated 80%. That should decrease significantly the number of bags going into our rivers and canals, and into the sea off the coastline, which must be positive, particularly given the damage that they can do to wildlife.

I will not delay colleagues any longer. I thank them for this important debate about an issue that affects many people in our communities and about which thousands and millions of people across the country feel passionate. I have sensed that when I have made comments in press articles and received correspondence from across the country, We will introduce a strong and robust litter strategy, because this Government recognise that litter and fly-tipping are antisocial, and we need to crack down on them. We are absolutely determined to get on and do so.

3.18 pm

Mr Betts: It has been a good, constructive and generally agreeable debate, in the sense that we agreed on most of the issues. I thank the Minister for his apology, which I accept—and I am sure I can do that on behalf of the Committee. I suspect that responsibility was not totally
within his Department, as he has delicately explained with reference to the complications of getting many Departments to agree on a reply.

We started with general agreement about the need for a national strategy and the national clean-up day. We can probably see the effects of the clean-up day fairly quickly; the national strategy may take a bit longer, but I am sure that the Committee will keep a close eye on it.

The Minister was right to say that local authorities are at the heart of the whole issue. They have the responsibility for dealing with litter directly or co-ordinating the activities of others who deal with it. Our recommendations were mostly directed at Government, but generally they were about asking for extra powers for local authorities, to enable them to do their job in a variety of ways. We had generally positive responses and agreement on fixed penalty notices—their extension to fly-tipping and the increase in the level of penalties—on which the Minister said there is consultation; the impounding of vehicles used for fly-tipping; and pilots on trunk roads to look at littering from cars. All those things seem to be positive ways to move forward, and the Government have responded to the Select Committee recommendations either by agreeing to carry them out—in some cases having done so already—or by looking at how they can be carried out in the future.

There are things that local authorities can do irrespective of those issues. The smart bins that we talked about, on which there is general agreement, and engagement with charities on the collection of bulky household items are among them. Individual authorities can implement them, and can learn from other local authorities. That is at the heart of localism in the end; things may be done well in one area, and other areas say, "Yes, that's a good idea. We will do it also."

The Select Committee will want to return to the matter and consider various issues. In the end it is one thing to debate here, but another to get improvements on littering and dealing with litter. I am sure that we will want to keep an eye on, in particular, the serious problems of tobacco littering, chewing gum, fly-tipping and fast food, which we identified as real problems. We will be interested in the Government's progress on the trunk road issue and littering from cars, which the Minister said the Government would look at again. In the end, to be effective the Select Committee will need better data on which to monitor performance. The Minister has accepted that and I think he has a working party looking at the question. We will be interested to see what comes out of it, because it will be crucial. Although there may be anecdotal evidence, we can only really tell whether things are improving from the data that are collected. We need better data for the future.

I think we have all enjoyed the debate. I hope we have, and that it has also been constructive and useful.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Seventh Report from the Communities and Local Government Committee of Session 2014-15, on Litter and fly-tipping in England, HC 607, and the Government response, Cm 9097.

3.21 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall
Tuesday 1 March 2016

[Mr Christopher Chope in the Chair]

High Streets

9.30 am

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of high streets.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I am delighted to have secured this timely debate as the Budget fast approaches. I am also pleased that hon. Members from all parts of the House have taken the time to come along this morning.

It is almost four years since Mary Portas published her review of the future of Britain’s high streets. Contained within were 28 recommendations for improving our town centres, many of which are yet to be implemented. I sought this debate not because I think that all the recommendations should have been implemented—I do not—but because the health of our high streets has not improved significantly in the past four years. It is important to highlight the challenges that shops on Britain’s high streets continue to face, to raise the profile of the issue once again, and to encourage the Government to take some relatively straightforward steps to alleviate the burdens that are threatening the existence of small, independent businesses across Britain.

I know that colleagues will want to raise issues particular to their constituencies and to bring ideas to the table, so I will focus my remarks on several key points. The challenges faced by high streets are many and varied, including tough competition from online retailers and supermarkets, excessive parking restrictions and/or charges, and the proliferation of tax break-benefiting charity shops. Many of the symptoms are also causes of the steady decline in the fortunes of small, independent retailers on UK high streets. Equally, it is neither possible nor desirable to alter many of the factors that put these retailers out of business: for example, it would be retrograde to try to make a profit; in fact, we are denying them the chance to open in the first place.

First, charity shops should be reclassified under the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 so that the local authority’s permission is required to change the use of a shop to a charity shop. Secondly, the mandatory rate relief for charity shops should be reduced from 85% to 50%. Thirdly, the sale of new goods in charity shops should be monitored and the restrictions enforced more effectively. Fourthly, business rates should be reduced and the system, which unfairly punishes property-intensive industries, should be simplified.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. He will recall that in the last Parliament the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills carried out an inquiry on the future of our high streets and retail, and it recommended fundamental reform of business rates. With the Chancellor due to announce his Budget soon, does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital to reduce that burden on our city centres and high streets?

Mark Menzies: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. The Treasury is always listening, so it will be aware of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee report and will have heard my hon. Friend’s comment. I am sure that the Chancellor will include such a measure in his Budget.

In the lead-up to the Budget, the Treasury is making encouraging noises suggesting that my point about business rates may finally be addressed. Although we must continue to apply pressure to ensure that business rates are made less onerous, the issue has been considered extensively, so I intend to focus predominantly on my first three points. Similarly, I have campaigned heavily over the past four years to relax Sunday trading legislation, but there is little point in raising the matter again today because the Government have included measures in the Enterprise Bill to devolve the power to relax such restrictions. The fact that local authorities will have the power to zone Sunday trading hours to help high streets and city centres out of-town retail parks is particularly welcome, and I encourage the Government to continue their endeavours. In that and many other areas, the Government have shown themselves to be willing to carry through necessary reforms, regardless of attempts by vested interests to sustain the status quo. I shall use this opportunity to encourage Ministers to act similarly on charity shops.

Napoleon famously said that we were a nation of shopkeepers. I wish that we were. In recent years, we have increasingly become a nation of charity shopkeepers, as high streets up and down the country have been filled with charity shops. There are currently over 10,000 in the UK, and their number increased by 30% between October 2008 and October 2011. In my constituency, the scale of the increase has been impossible to ignore: there are now 15 charity shops in St Annes and less than three miles down the road, in the centre of Lytham, there are nine more—with, I am informed, another two on the way.

Let me state clearly that I recognise the value of charity shops. Each shop raises thousands of pounds a year for good causes and serves an excellent practical purpose as a place for people to dispose of unwanted possessions in the knowledge that they will not be wasted. Equally, they provide a community space for local shoppers and volunteers, filling shopping space that in some cases would otherwise go empty. However, the question has to be asked: are we heading towards saturation?

Charity shops are not universally welcomed by shoppers or by other retailers, who can struggle to compete. As someone who worked in the retail industry for 15 years before being elected to Parliament, I not only recognise but welcome the competitive nature of the business. If there is no market for a shop’s goods, if it cannot attract customers and if it cannot make a profit, it must inevitably close. It is not the business of Government or any other institution to support a failed enterprise that has no future. The problem is that we are not even allowing retail businesses to attempt to attract customers or to try to make a profit; in fact, we are denying them the chance to open in the first place.
No potential future shopkeeper, all of whom should frankly be applauded for being willing to enter such a difficult industry, can possibly compete with a charity shop. An ordinary retail outlet will largely employ its staff. Over 2.7 million people work in over 270,000 shops across the UK. From next month, all those businesses will pay the majority of their staff at least £7.20 an hour, rising to £9 an hour by 2020. Those who want to set up a shop should be commended for providing valuable new employment opportunities for local people. In contrast, according to the Charity Retail Association, only some 17,000 people are in paid employment in charity shops. Before one even begins to consider the multiple and varied tax breaks on offer, charity shops work because they have an unpaid, volunteer workforce of around 213,000 across the country. When one considers that fact and the value we attach to making work pay in this country, I suggest that we agree—at least we should agree—that it is far better to have a business in shop premises than a charitable organisation manned purely by volunteers.

Again, that is not to say that charity shops are intrinsically problematic. They most certainly are not. The fact that charity shops are staffed by volunteers is actually a good thing. Many of us know from our own communities that charity shops often provide enormously valuable opportunities for a diverse range of people to come together, including those with disabilities and those who have been out of the workplace for a long time. The problem is simply that there are too many shops and the numbers are ever increasing. Shoppers on our high streets are suffering from a lack of variety as a result. Indeed, many charities are struggling to find volunteers because of competition from other charity shops. It is now time to enact solutions, rather than to merely consider this oft-diagnosed problem. That is why my first suggestion is that charity shops should be reclassified under the 1987 order, leaving only commercially operating enterprises in class A1 and enabling local authorities to prevent the saturation of high streets with charity shops.

As I have already outlined, Lytham and St Annes are increasingly saturated with charity shops. Local councillors are frustrated at their lack of power to prevent a further increase in numbers. Although I entirely agree that it is far better to have a charity shop than no shop at all, it is often assumed that a charity has taken out a lease because there is no competition from prospective businesses to move into the premises. That was indeed the case in many parts of the UK, particularly after the 2008 recession, but it is often not the case, particularly in affluent areas. In Lytham, a shop recently announced that it intended to move, leaving its existing premises vacant. I know for a fact that a local business owner would have been pleased to have the opportunity to move in and to make a go of setting up an enterprise there, with all the resulting employment opportunities and benefits to the local economy. Remarkably, however, competition for the premises was not the fair competition that I spoke of earlier, because it came from a charity shop.

No landlord thinking purely about the bottom line, as is to be expected, would choose to rent their shop to an untried, untested business that is forced to pay staff at least £7.20 an hour, with exorbitant business rates on top—not when they can reach agreement on a long-term lease with a charity. I know of cases in Lytham of leases being negotiated for terms of up to 10 years. Charity shops do not need to pay their staff, they do not buy the majority of their stock, and they pay at most 20% of the rates of other retailers. That is not fair competition; it is a complete distortion of the bargaining power of the two parties, which we have now entrenched in law.

Mary Portas stated in her 2011 review: “start ups should be the number one priority when it comes to giving discounts. The business rate discounts that charity shops enjoy builds a disadvantage into the system that is causing a problem. Landlords are choosing the safe option of charity shops and small new retailers aren’t getting a look in. There will be no growth and innovation now or in the future if we don’t address this.”

Of course, if good landlords who cared about their local communities were a universal commodity, there would be no need for local government to step in. Clearly, however, we cannot leave landlords to self-regulate the complexion of our high streets. Powers must be given to local authorities to enable them to determine whether an area needs yet another charity shop, or whether to allow new businesses the opportunity to establish. If, after a reasonable period of time, no small independent retailer has come forward to take on a lease, it would be perfectly reasonable to allow a charity to take on the premises. The power would mean simply that local authorities could refuse to grant planning approval for a change of use from a shop to a charity shop.

Recently, action has been taken to streamline and to speed up the planning system in this area under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015. I see no reason why further swift action cannot be taken to make a relatively straightforward change to differentiate charity shops from other shops. I see no grounds that render such an approach unreasonable. A charity shop is clearly different from a commercially run shop in all the ways I have outlined. The law has built in the differences. I would therefore give short shrift to any claim that a change in classification would give cause for judicial review. That would be a base excuse for a Government to use if they wanted to avoid taking such action. Ultimately, our commitment to localism was a large reason why a Conservative Government were elected last May. It is important that the Government carry through on our commitment and allow local people to develop high streets that work better for them.

I will speed through the rest of my recommendations as they are far less controversial and have been suggested widely before; also, I am conscious that several other Members wish to contribute to the debate. The second proposal that I urge the Government to adopt is to reduce the mandatory rate of relief from business rates from 80% to 50%. The idea is not new and it was proposed as a positive way to level the playing field between charity shops and other businesses in a Welsh Government consultation which was completed in July 2013. The consultation was supposed to form the basis of the discussion between the devolved Administrations and the Government, but no outcome has yet appeared. I make the proposal again in the hope that the Government will carefully consider implementing it.
As the Welsh Government report makes clear, the professionalism and commercial focus of the charity shop industry has increased markedly over the past 20 years. As a result, the detailed recommendation was that the amount of rate relief available for larger charity shops occupying premises of higher rateable value should be restricted to an upper rateable value limit of £36,000; all charity shops should receive 80% rate relief on the first £12,000 of the rateable value; charity rate relief should be reduced from 80% to 50% on the next £24,000 of rateable value; and for rateable values in excess of £36,000, business rate relief should fall to zero, but in tiers. All charity shops would therefore receive some rate relief from business rates, but the amount of relief they received would be reduced in stages. Those seem to be perfectly sound, well thought through proposals—made, it is worth mentioning, by a Labour Administration—especially when set in the context of a proliferation in the number of charity shops.

I also want a change to the way in which rateable value is calculated for charities with more than one premises in the same town, in order to avoid a loophole in the system. It is right to question whether charities should be treated the same as ratepayers in their second or even third premises on the same high street; if they did not, there is no cause to believe that charity shops would be forced to close as, lest we forget, they have little to pay in overheads and should be paying virtually nothing in stock costs. Equally, such a measure would incentivise the foundation of charity shops in smaller premises, favouring smaller, often local charities over what are now, frankly, large national chains. The results of such changes can only be positive. They would level the playing field between commercial and charitable operations, and put some extra money in the hands of Government. Given that, I cannot imagine why it has not already been done.

The Welsh Government consultation also recommended the introduction of my third proposal: to enforce and monitor more effectively the extant restrictions on the sale of new goods in charity shops. If charities are found to be trading in new goods, particularly in areas where commercial shops are selling the same products, relief from business rates should be reduced or even removed. Again, powers should be given to local authorities to enforce that effectively.

In Lytham, of the 71 shops in the town centre, 69 sell a range of goods that the nine charity shops also stock, including cards, clothes, books, pictures, artificial flowers and general domestic goods. Inevitably, some of those goods have to be new. I do not advocate charities being prevented from selling Christmas cards, for example, or certain other new products that have long been associated with fundraising initiatives. I recognise that many charity shops sell only a limited amount of new goods and that roughly 85% of goods sold in charity shops are from donations. However, some of the larger charity shops in particular are making considerably more than the average 6.8% of income for which the sale of new goods in UK charity shops supposedly accounts.

As charity shops, especially those belonging to large national chains, become increasingly professional in the way they market and sell goods, it is important to restate the principle that only businesses paying full business rates should be allowed to compete with one another. Only businesses should be allowed to purchase stock to sell, while charity shops should endeavour to have close to 100% of sales in donated goods. As the number of charity shops increases, so does the amount of competition between them. It can no longer be guaranteed that charity shops are abiding by either the principle or the law on the restriction on the sale of new goods. Not only should charities be reminded of their obligations not to undercut retailers that do not benefit from charity shops’ volunteer workforce or tax breaks, but those obligations should be enforced with powers given to local authorities.

On business rates, only yesterday the highly respected British Retail Consortium warned that the pressures of, in particular, higher wage costs as a result of the national living wage and the apprenticeship levy, coupled with the overall pressures that high street retailers continue to face, could lead to the loss of 900,000 jobs over the next 10 years. Of the 270,000 shops in the UK, up to 74,000 could shut, with the impact greatest in Wales and the north of England. If that dire warning is not sufficient to elicit a response in the Budget this year, I do not know what will.

For too long we have ignored the plight of small retailers and allowed exorbitant duties to cripple their ability to compete with online and large out-of-town retailers. There is still a place for small high street retailers. People enjoy shopping in their local towns and the variety that a multiplicity of retailers affords. It is not the case that small shops are obsolete. Retail is an industry overburdened with taxes and red tape. The Government recognised that and conducted a review of business rates last year. Now, however, it is time for action. Clearly, some form of property tax will continue to be imposed on retailers, but it would be a welcome relief to all businesses if the Government capped the national multiplier now. Rateable values must be assessed with greater frequency, with open market valuations made more sympathetic to retailers. The whole system must be simplified, with all reliefs and exemptions kept in particular review.

We have a real opportunity not to sustain high street retailers artificially, but to lift much of the pressure from their shoulders. If the Government are going to impose—as they are right to do—a national living wage, they must ensure that the tax burden is lifted in a corresponding fashion. Also, we want more people in work on a better wage. If retailers are forced to close in great numbers, neither of those objectives is fulfilled.

I could cover many more points, but I am sure that other speakers today will do so. My plea to the Government is to take action on business rates and to address the unequal balance between charity shops and small retailers. For too long, both Conservative and Labour Governments have been reluctant to tackle these issues, and they have intensified to the extent that no action is no longer an option. My constituency does not need another charity shop. Local people want small businesses to be given a chance to succeed and, in future, I hope that they can.

9.50 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chipper. May I congratulate the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) on securing today’s debate? I will take a slightly different tack as I reflect on my local high streets across York—not necessarily in the centre of York, but more in the suburbs.
I am proud to represent what is now Britain’s best high street, Bishophorpe Road—affectionately known as Bishy Road—in York. The journey it has been on is really quite an inspiring story. Back in 2005, when the old Terry’s factory closed, morale in the community was really hit. We also had the closure of the local post office, and Bishy Road, outside the city walls, was feeling the pinch. What has happened since has been the result not of Government action, but of community action. That is the important story that I have to tell, although retailers tell me that Government action could help their cause.

For example, business rates are really hurting local businesses’ ability to be sustainable. Therefore, my message to the Chancellor about the Budget would be to look at how business rates can be used to regenerate the local high street—which would be essential to assist small trainers to sustain their businesses, because we see so many businesses spring up, only to disappear within 12 months or so—and how business rates can be used to bring life to the community. High streets should not just be about commodities, but should be very much at the centre of the community.

Next week we will also have the important decision about Sunday trading. We know that if trade is moved out of our high streets and into the supermarkets, that will have an impact on the small traders who are trying to make their way. We also know that 91% of shop workers oppose the Government’s proposals.

The other vital point—one on which I agree with the hon. Gentleman—is about planning. It is really important that we do not have control by the landowner, but that councils are given the powers to determine who resides in the high street and to enable the community to grow on the back of that. It should not just be about landowners wanting to take the power back to communities to shape their high streets if we want to see them at the centre of our communities.

I want to come back to the story of Bishy Road and say how fantastic it is. Under the visionary leadership of Jonny Hayes, a local trader on the street, the traders were brought together, not to compete but to co-operate. They formed the Bishy Road Traders Association to market together under a common identity, not as individuals vying for a space in the market. They created the strapline “I heart Bishy Road” and put it out across the city. And yes, they are all separate businesses, ranging from places to eat and buy produce to a bike shop and stores that sell just about everything under the sun, but they work together. That is the secret of Bishy Road: they identify with the community; they are a community—a community of traders serving their local community. Service is at the heart of their message. Knowing that all will benefit from people visiting Bishy Road, they work together in that collaborative way, because as people walk up and down, they are most likely to drop into one or two of the other premises on the street.

The local community is at the heart of the Bishy Road vision, so the traders identify themselves with it. They are involved with the local school. During the floods, the Bishy Road traders were at the heart of the rescue operation, trying to get people out of their homes and keep them dry, as the floods were just off the Bishy Road high street. There is such a strong relationship now: the street has a family feel. People want to come and experience that, not just from the local community but from across the city. It is about a sense of belonging, supporting and pulling together, working together for the local community. The traders had the vision and the community is behind it. It is very much about the traders giving something back to the community and creating that sense of working together.

The third successful element of Bishy Road is that it is at the heart of community events. That started with a day when they decided to try to get people out of their cars and get them walking, so they closed the street. Since then we have had event after event. We were very fortunate to have the Tour de France come through Bishy Road at a pace and, since then, the Tour de Yorkshire. Bishy Road has been a real focus of community activities, to the point where 10,000 people came on to the street to celebrate as a community with a street party. Bishy Road now even has its own Christmas lights, which puts money back into charities in the community. It is a fantastic story—a vision set out by the traders that has brought the area and the community, which was feeling the pain from the closure of the factory and from other commodities, to life again. This year’s floods have really shown how the community now works together as a complete unit.

But it does not stop there; in York it is spreading throughout the city—this is the great story. Again under strong leadership, Micklegate—which is within the city walls, with a different mix of traders and residents—is now pulling together to create its own identity and community. That will come to the fore as it starts marketing its identity this year.

Fossgate, another section of the city, has a footprint in the night-time economy in particular, but also in the daytime economy. It is a really pleasant area now to walk down. Back in the olden days it used to be where the prisons were, but it is now a fantastic place for people to go to in the night-time and choose a venue to eat, drink and enjoy themselves, and it has its own identity. This area of the city was particularly hit by the recent floods. While it is a thriving community, it is also struggling. That is why I say to the Minister that it is important that we get on top of what happens to small businesses when they flood and, when it comes to their insurance, ensure that we have a Flood Re scheme for the small business community.

It does not stop there either. Next in our sights is Front Street in Acomb. Once a thriving local shopping community in the ’70s and ’80s, businesses then started to struggle and either moved to out-of-town shopping centres or were hit by business rates. National chains then moved in, which broke up the sense of community. However, I am pleased to say that there are plans. There are three bookmakers on the high street and a money shop—it does not have that sense of identity at the moment—but plans are afoot, and they include charity shops. However, instead of seeing charity shops as the enemy, we should very much see them as part of the community. Therefore, the important thing is working together as a community—that is the secret—and not necessarily marking out the different types of businesses. That is harder with national chains, because they have other interests to pay attention to, but if we can get
them to pull together into that part of the community, there will be more of a sense of building up the high street.

On Front Street in York, we have the Gateway centre—it is a local church, but it is also the hub of the community. It has its own café, it is where the food bank is and it provides debt advice, family support and community activities. There are so many opportunities in Acomb to create another expression of community, building on those footprints to make communities feel like home again. Front Street is using events to bring the area to life. We have Acomb Alive and the Acomb dance, arts and music festival—the ADAM festival—where more than 50 acts have performed on the high street, which has wide pavements and is ideal to build that community sense.

We have some unique opportunities across York. Since the floods, we have also seen independent traders right across the city pulling together to say, “What about our row of shops?” It is important not just to focus on the city centre, but to centre our shopping centres in our communities and pull people together. What I would say to colleagues from across the House is: why not come and visit York? Come and visit Bishy Road and talk to traders to see exactly what their experience has been. They would love to share their story and see their footprint.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con) rose—

Rachael Maskell: I can see that someone is raring to come up to York.

Andrew Stephenson: I would love to visit York and am delighted that the hon. Lady is making such an eloquent case for her local high street, which was rightly recognised in the Great British High Street competition 2015. Perhaps she would also pay tribute to some fantastic Lancashire towns, such as Colne, which was a finalist in the market high street category and sadly lost out to another Yorkshire area.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman is obviously proud of his community, but I have to say that taking the prize was an honour for our city, so if anyone is on their way to Lancashire, I would say make sure it is via Yorkshire first.

To conclude, we have opportunities to learn from each other. Not everything is built on Government policy—it is important to capture the spirit of the community—but we have an opportunity with the Budget that is coming up. Therefore, I urge the Minister to urge the Chancellor to address the issue of business rates, also to look again at planning in his own Department and make sure that communities have a say in their high streets, so that they belong to them and can revive the local economy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): We will start the winding-up speeches at half past, and four hon. Members want to speak, so I hope that they will recognise that a bit of self-discipline is required.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I have heard of competition on the high street, but here there seems to be competition between high streets. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on making a persuasive case. I can almost see her on one of those 1930s rail posters, saying “Come to York, to Bishy, and live.”

Were any Member who is here today to stroll down to Westminster station, hop aboard the District line, take the scenic route to Ealing and alight at Ealing Broadway—at Haven Green, where many a scene from the “Carry On” films was made—and then to hop on the E2 bus, they would come to Pitshanger Lane, which won the Great British High Street award for best high street in London. In every shop and retail premises on the lane, there is a letter from the Minister, signed personally by him, congratulating us. I have tried to take some credit for it, but the credit goes to the organisers and the local council, to the Pitshanger Village Traders Association and the three active local councillors—particularly Lynne Murray and David Rodgers—and also to John Martin, from the local estate agents, who has done so much work for it.

The important thing is that a massive change is happening in high streets, before our eyes. Throughout the 1980s barns on the bypass seemed to be the thing. We had planning policy guidance almost encouraging people to move out of the city centre. We had inward-looking malls that did not encourage any interaction. They did not encourage people to walk through but were inward-looking, defensive and negative. They are not fit for purpose any more. Those malls are usually too small—people need bigger retail space—and not specialist enough. What is happening in the high street today is dramatic, and it is almost a case of the Government needing to follow behind the change, which is happening organically. There are many things that the Government can do, which have been mentioned by the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies). I appreciate that I should not refer to him as my hon. Friend, but he is my friend, and I am grateful to him for raising the matter.

There are things that the Government could do to encourage things that are already happening in the high street. High streets are specialised, with more high-end, quality smaller retailers. In my part of the world we have butchers and bakers and the marvellous Pitshanger Bookshop, which has managed to survive despite the depredations of the internet. If the major internet book suppliers paid a little more tax, there might even be a level playing field; but such shops survive. There is also more pedestrianisation, and it would be marvellous if cycling were encouraged. We have a lot of empirical data about high streets and if there is one thing we know about pedestrians and cyclists it is that, although you would not think they would be major purchasers, they are. That is why we need public transport and a different sort of high street. We also need housing on the high street. What is wrong with emulating Pitshanger Lane, and having housing in the high street itself—getting totally away from the inward-looking mall and the barn on the bypass, and into something more organic, structured and accessible, from which it is easier to operate?

I would not be a member of my party were I not to mention in passing the potential horror and devastation that the relaxation of Sunday trading laws could bring.
It is an appalling proposal, which I hope all right-minded people will immediately oppose. [ Interruption. ] I hear the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) vociferously commenting. When the Sunday trading laws were relaxed at the time of the London Olympics we gained all the empirical evidence needed to show that retail sales declined in and around the area. We could see it happening. Oxford Economics calculates that we will lose 3,000 jobs if we relax Sunday trading.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Association of Convenience Stores carried out a survey of chief executives, and asked how they would use the powers if there was a relaxation: 52% said they would use them to support out-of-town shopping centres as opposed to high streets. Is not that a disgrace and something that highlights the intrinsic danger of the proposals for our high streets?

Stephen Pound: I am grateful for that point, particularly as when the hon. Gentleman was Lord Mayor of Belfast he was a proud champion of the retail sector, in a fairly challenging environment. I entirely agree, and we should perhaps give the Association of Convenience Stores credit for the detailed briefing it has circulated, which provides a great deal of evidence.

The business rates situation will never satisfy everyone. People will always want zero business rates for themselves, and 100%—plus for their competitors. We must calculate on a more subtle, sensitive basis, because at the moment our approach is too broad-brush. Local authorities should have more freedom and a greater ability to encourage people by giving holidays, to help them come into an area. That was brought dramatically home to me in August 2011 when we had riots in west London. How could the local authority and the Government encourage traders to get back on their feet? We did a lot, and to be fair—though it sticks in my craw to say so—the Mayor of London stepped up to the plate. We all came round together on that occasion, with the Mayor’s relief fund, but would not it have been wonderful if the local authority had been able, without suffering a capitation cost, to provide the opportunity for people to go back to the high streets on a rate-free or rate holiday basis?

I have said that the high street is changing; there are premises on the high street nowadays that we would simply not have recognised previously. There are showrooms for online providers, which I never thought I would see. There are places where people can deliver and collect parcels. I am not a great customer for fine clothing but it is quite good to be able to pop into a shop to see what a suit looks like. In my case obviously any suit would be an improvement, but it is good for people to be able to see the goods and not just to have their order whispering through the ether on the internet.

I have a couple of things to ask the Minister. First, I ask him to look at the high street in its totality and not just from the point of view of business rates and charity shops, important as those issues are. Will he consider it from the point of view of transport? The second thing that any trader I talk to on my patch mentions, after business rates, is parking. We must address that issue. I apologise, because I appreciate that York and Fylde have powerful cases, and powerful advocates to make them, but the problem in London is horrendous. Stop and shop schemes and other developments like that are very important. The issue is one on which the Minister, for whom I have a lot of respect, needs to do some cross-departmental work with the Department for Transport, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and various other agencies, to pull things together.

We also need relaxation of the use classes orders. At present, the variation that local authorities have been given has not been effective. Local authorities do not have the ability to use the old classifications they could use before; and the consequence is a proliferation of a particular sort of trader. As the former leader of one of the largest councils in London, Mr Chope, you probably know more about this than I do; however, I understand that there are restrictions on funeral parlours and off-licences, but no general restrictions. Why cannot the local authority have some input into the range, type and style of premises opening on the high street? I have no objection to having 29 cappuccino bars in the high street—but frankly it is 27 too many. I am not sure that we need them. I appreciate that the flinty-eyed, hard-hearted Adam Smith devotees on the Government Benches might say, “Let the market decide”—that is fine, but I think the market can work with the state and the council on this, in everybody’s interest.

I want to see the continuation of what is, in fact, a renaissance of the high street. I want to see that not only on Pitshanger Lane, which is a wonderful place that I would advise anyone to visit, but on Greenford Avenue, Greenford Road and Yeading Lane. I want to see it throughout my constituency and throughout the country, from Fylde to York and everywhere else. To do that, we need the chance to take it seriously.

The renaissance of the high street has not been easy. It is the result of a great deal of work from a lot of dedicated councils and councillors and, above all, local people, local traders and the local community. They need a little bit of help and encouragement. We are looking for a bit of fiscal generosity in the Budget, in order to encourage the people on the high street who are holding the line at the present time and enable them to expand and extend what is, after all, an absolute miracle; it is not only a renaissance. Look at the modern high street: it is a sight to behold. When looking at the modern high street, we must look at it in Ealing.

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): In Skelmersdale, we would love a high street. There are plans for a town centre development that currently consist of just one building, yet the owners of that building are fighting tooth and nail to stop the development, despite 90% of the retail spend going outside of Skelmersdale. Does my hon. Friend agree that sometimes the protection of individual interests, as in that case, damages the wider benefits for all residents and the community? The town and its community should come first, and we need extra help to make that happen.

Stephen Pound: If I have learnt one thing in my many, many years in politics, it is to never comment on internal Skelmersdale matters; that has been my watchword. Unfortunately, the area is represented by an excellent Member of Parliament, and I have every confidence in my hon. Friend’s analysis.
I will close by making one last request: will the Minister consider the reinstatement of the retail rate relief scheme, which provided relief to all businesses with a rateable value of £50,000 or less? It was a good scheme that everybody supported, and it was very helpful. I thank the Minister for his work, particularly on the Great British High Street competition. He is something of a legend in Pitspanger Lane, and he can have a free cup of coffee in many a premise there, but I ask him to consider the reinstatement of the retail rate relief scheme.

10.12 am

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I thank the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) for securing this important debate. I was not going to comment on charity shops, but I thought he made some extremely interesting points on them, some of which I have made in the past.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary small shops group, I regard these issues as very important. The high street plays an important part in the economic, cultural and social make-up of our communities. However, one of the single largest challenges that those on the high street face is the business rates they currently have to pay. That tax is completely out of touch with the economic reality, particularly in places such as Rochdale, where some businesses are paying bills that are three times their rent.

In the 2013 autumn statement, the Chancellor introduced business rate relief for a two-year period between April 2014 and March 2016. For the first year, that provided a discount of up to £1,000, which then increased by an extra £500. The scheme provided some much needed relief to more than 900 businesses in Rochdale, and it has had a tangible positive effect. Without it, some shops would have definitely gone under, and the total relief in Rochdale has been just more than £1 million.

I welcomed that proposal with open arms when it was announced, but it needs to continue. Unfortunately, businesses will be receiving a letter outlining that that support is to stop after 31 March 2016. I believe that that is a big mistake. Many of those benefiting from the relief have used it to invest in their shops and employ more staff. The money does not get diverted through some obscure offshore account; it gets spent in our communities, where it has a direct positive impact.

Rochdale has been leading the way with its own bespoke business rate relief scheme for new start-ups. In the first 12 months, the scheme provided an 80% rate relief. For the next 12 months, new start-ups were given a 50% reduction. Rochdale is now looking to extend the scheme for a third year and roll it out in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes).

The scheme has provided much-needed support for constituents such as Dale Nugent, who runs Rochdale Mobility, a shop selling wheelchairs and mobility scooters for the disabled. Under the scheme, Dale has been paying business rates of just £2,200 a year, on top of his rent. However, that is set to end in March, and with the Government withdrawing their relief support, he will now end up with a business rates bill of £8,000 a year. That could put him out of business. Dale provides a vital service for many disabled people in Rochdale. His customers cannot just pop to Oldham or Bury as easily as other people. He is a good, friendly business owner; his customers like to pop in and have a chat with him, but because of the Government’s failure on business rates, his vital business could be in jeopardy.

The council tax relief scheme only provides a temporary fix and is limited in terms of helping to fill empty shops on key streets. We need a radical reform of the rating system. I support the recommendation from the Association of Convenience Stores that all small businesses should be removed from the business rates system completely. That would have two tangible effects. First, it would allow small businesses to increase their investment in their business, increase growth and thrive in their community. Secondly, it would reduce the current pressures facing the Valuation Office Agency and create a more efficient scheme for business rates collection. I would also like to see the ability for local authorities to vary their rates upwards as well as downwards, which they can do now. They could then, for example, increase rates on out-of-town sites and use that increase to offset rates on the main high street.

The hon. Member for Fylde made a number of important points about charity shops. We are set to see the complete devolution of business rates to local authorities. If local authorities are not given more freedom to set business rates—perhaps increasing them for charity shops or other shops—and to regulate the high street, this devolution is not really fair or adequate in terms of giving local authorities the powers they should have if they have the burden of carrying business rates. That is an important point. Another proposal that I believe would help the high street is reducing the periods between revaluations of business rates, which has already been mentioned. Five years is far too long, and three years might be more appropriate.

Finally, let me finish by saying that I do not agree with relaxing Sunday trading laws at all. There is no cultural, social or economic argument for it.

10.17 am

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I am delighted to be able to speak in this important debate, secured by the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies).

As far as I am concerned, high streets are only going to survive as long as the shopping experience they offer is better than the one offered elsewhere. To me, that experience includes an element of convenience, such as affordable close parking, which hon. Members have mentioned, and a variety of shops within easy walking distance of one another. There is also a social element to the experience, as the cafés, bars and pubs that are also part of our high streets are places where people can meet and relax. The important thing about our high streets is that we get a personal service. We have face-to-face interaction and we get to know our local shopkeepers.

Retail is a competitive business, and it is no business for the weak-hearted. Most independent shops such as the ones in my constituency—in Cockermouth and Maryport, for example—are run on modest finances, and they make their owners a living rather than a fortune because margins and profits are tight. Government policies aimed at supporting and reinvigorating our high streets need to focus on reducing the cost burdens
on retailers. We have talked about business rates, but the Government need to increase the opportunities for business owners to invest in and expand their businesses.

The two town centres in my constituency that I would like to talk about briefly are Cockermouth and Maryport. Maryport has a wonderful town centre, with fantastic examples of Georgian and Victorian buildings. It has a lovely harbour and a proud Roman history, and I would like to invite everybody to come to the blues festival held there in the last weekend of July.

Stephen Pound: We’re going to be busy, aren’t we?

Sue Hayman: We certainly are. Despite all that has happened in recent years, Maryport still struggles. It has some excellent independent shops, but it also has a lot of charity shops, which have been mentioned, and too many empty units to be the thriving centre that it deserves to be.

Last time I was there, a local shopkeeper said to me that she was fed up with people thinking that her shop was a charity shop, because there are too many charity shops in the area where her shop is. Specialist independent shops are the anchor of our high streets and are a key factor in encouraging people to come in and shop there, and that also includes local pharmacies. We have an excellent local pharmacy in Cockermouth called Allison’s, which is really concerned about some of the Government’s proposals on pharmacies, so if that could be taken into consideration, I would be grateful.

We need to look at the significant increase in internet shopping and the impact that that has on our town centres. Town centres can compete by offering the great shopping experience that I have talked about, but internet companies really do need to pay the same taxes, so that they do not have the different profit advantages that they currently have.

Mr Robin Walker: On that point, does the hon. Lady agree that the Government could, in their reform of business rates, alter the balance of the burden between category A high-street retail and warehousing? All those internet companies need warehousing and delivery to get their goods to market, but category A high-street retail currently has a premium, which belongs in the 1960s rather than in the 21st century.

Sue Hayman: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and I completely agree.

Cockermouth also has a beautiful high street. It is well known for speciality shops and art galleries, and its tree-lined Main Street has a statue of Lord Mayo, who was formerly the MP—he was later assassinated, so I am hoping that history does not repeat itself.

What would I particularly like the Government to do? The first thing, as we have said, is to make sure that business rates do not discourage small, independent shopkeepers. I was therefore also disappointed, as other hon. Members were, to hear that the retail rate relief scheme is not going to be continued beyond April this year.

Cockermouth chamber of trade and commerce has talked about the business improvement district schemes. It wanted to set one up and looked into it, but were advised by Allerdale borough council that the costs of administration meant that only shops with a rateable value greater than £11,000 would be included. That cut out most of the shops in Cockermouth and meant that it was just not feasible, so it would be good if the Government could look at how smaller independent retailers are able to participate in a BID scheme to help to improve the local shopping experience.

Finally—I will wind up, because I know another hon. Member still wants to speak—I make a plea to the Government about business insurance. I am sure that everyone here is aware that Cockermouth flooded terribly just before Christmas. That was the second time in six years. Main Street was also completely dug up in 2014, mainly to do with the drainage work that was needed following the previous floods, so flooding has had an enormous impact there. Some shopkeepers there have already said that they are not going to re-open, partly because of the stress, but a lot of it is to do with the lack of insurance. Others are privately telling me that they cannot do this again. If we do not sort out insurance for shops in relation to flooding, and particularly for small independent retailers, Cockermouth Main Street as it is now will disappear. That cannot be allowed to happen. It would be a crime, so I urge the Minister, please, to talk to me about this in the future—I would be really appreciative if he did.
pounds from across the whole world, from as far away as China, the United States, Hong Kong and Malaysia. That is where the business is going, and it is a tremendous success story.

At the same time in Newtownards, we also have multinationals making up the numbers, and it is not the other way round. Hon. Members have referred to balance, and it is so important to get the balance right in the high street. If the balance is right, multinationals can continue alongside the small shops, which can and should continue. Giving the right support to high streets across the UK will help hard-pushed, home-grown talent to showcase their best on our high streets.

Turning to coffee culture, the hon. Member for Ealing North referred to 27 cappuccino coffee outlets—we do not have 27, but we have a lot more than we used to have. We now have a coffee culture in Newtownards that we did not have before, and there is a coffee culture in many towns. I have often said, as the hon. Gentleman will know, that I wonder how they all survive, but they bring people to the centre of the town—we do not have the weather for it, but if we did, we would be the Riviera of Northern Ireland. We have the coffee culture, however: in the centre of Newtownards, there are something like a dozen coffee shops, whereas at one time, there were perhaps two, so that is an example of how things can be done better.

Many of these matters are devolved, as the Minister will know. We have been involved in the Living Over The Shop scheme. That fantastic scheme enables the shops below to be utilised for their benefit to the high street, and at the same time, encourages people to live above them. We can take action in relation to that to ensure that high streets grow.

Our job is to mitigate all the push factors that are pushing people out of town centres and high streets and to enact support for the high street to get people back again. We have to address the issue of better and more affordable parking, as we have in Newtownards, where we have free parking just off the edge of the town. That attracts people to park and do their shopping, and it costs £1 for five hours, so what is happening there is quite good. Comber, Ballynahinch, Saintfield, Kilkeel and other major towns in the area also have some benefits in that respect as well. We also have to address the unsightly appearance of an empty shop front; that does not bring in any rates and is only part of the problem.

I will quickly touch on Sunday trading, as other hon. Members have. I spoke about this to the Minister beforehand, as I did to the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise last week. A number of Government Members are opposed to the measure as well, so the Government should be wary of bringing forward legislation that will not be universally supported by Members of Parliament in all parts of the House. Next week, we will have the opportunity on, I think, Tuesday—and perhaps Wednesday as well—to debate their plans. Sunday trading will not increase sales on the high street. It will displace trade to large, out-of-town retail parks and shopping centres. The current Sunday trading laws are a valued compromise and are supported by two thirds of the general public.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) referred to the fact that 52% of local authority chief executives said that they would help large shopping centres and out-of-town retail centres and supermarkets before high streets. Sixty-four per cent of local authority chief executives are concerned about the confusion that devolution of Sunday trading will cause consumers. This change has been thought of, discussed and deliberated on, but it is not the answer. Do not change the laws on Sunday trading. If the Government do, they will regret it. I say humbly and gently to them that they should not pursue something that they will lose on in the Chamber. If they lose on it in the Chamber, next Tuesday will be their day of reckoning when it comes to this issue.

We are elected by normal, everyday people, and it is normal, everyday people who are affected by this. It is the local butcher, the local baker, the local mum popping into the café before the school run and the local builder popping in for his morning tea. The high street is the hub for communities, and it simply cannot go away. It is up to us and all those in Government, at each and every level, to do everything we can to ensure that the high street not only continues to exist, but comes roaring back like the lion that it is—and indeed, the lion that it could be.

10.30 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I thank the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) for securing this important debate. It is important to recognise that the Government cannot do everything to fix the high street, but they can help to ensure that the conditions that allow it to flourish are put in place, whether that involves business rates, insurance, transport or encouraging the community to take ownership.

What the hon. Gentleman said about charity shops was interesting, but I do not agree with everything he said. Going into the details of what they are selling and doing might end up being more burdensome. We must be careful to ensure a balance between big national charities, which provide opportunities for volunteering and other jobs, and small, community-based charities, which may also want shops on the high street to sell their wares and produce their products.

I want to talk about some measures that the Scottish Government have put in place to help to support businesses and the high street, and to create conditions for small businesses to flourish. I agree with the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that high streets should be at the heart of every community. They are not only a place to shop, but a place to meet where valuable social interaction takes place. I am lucky to have in my constituency not only Glasgow’s amazing and vibrant city centre, but several smaller local high streets, most notably Argyle Street in Finnieston and Victoria Road on the Southside. I also have the High Street, which is the historical old part of Glasgow. I am proud to have located my constituency office just off the High Street, because I firmly believe that we should locate to high streets whenever we can.

The Scottish Government, who have embedded the “town centre first” principle and worked with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on that commitment, have said:

“Government, local authorities, the wider public sector, businesses and communities put the health of town centres at the heart of proportionate and best value decision making, seeking to deliver the best local outcomes regarding investment and de-investment...
decisions, alignment of policies, targeting of available resources to priority town centre sites, and encouraging vibrancy, equality and diversity."

That is a significant step, because so many public bodies in our country exist in local areas and can form the anchor of town centre strategies. As the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) said, cycling and pedestrianisation are important to make a greener business community. If people do not have to take cars into town centres and can get to them by public transport or cycling, it is better for everyone because they become greener and more attractive.

The Scottish Government’s approach to our high streets is the town centre action plan from November 2013. It is a long-running strategy and part of what the Government do. Investment has gone into ensuring that action supports the revitalisation of town centres and assists local action—the hon. Member for York Central mentioned this—to support smaller businesses and organisations in the community to do that.

The hon. Member for Ealing North referred to the importance of housing in our town centres. The Scottish Government have set up a £4 million town centre empty homes fund and a £2.75 million town centre housing fund, both of which help local communities to bring life back to town centres. The hon. Member for Fylde may be interested to know that they include Irvine and Ardrossan, which have seen great benefits from those funds, because people have started to come and live there and are therefore using local services. That will have a positive effect in regenerating the towns.

The Scottish Government have also introduced the regeneration capital grant fund, which is significant and has seen great benefits across communities in Scotland. They asked what was wrong with a community and what they could do to support community action and regeneration in the area. In my constituency, the historic Barras market has had investment of £1.4 million, as part of the Calton Barras action plan to bring derelict floor space in the area back into use. Empty shops and buildings in our town centres may become a blight on the area, but Government action to pump-prime and invest in those areas can bring underused places back to life. The Telfer gallery is a great example and is bringing artists’ studios to the heart of the Barras. It is a great opportunity to bring in new people and different types of businesses to improve and enhance what is there already.

The hon. Member for York Central made great mention of the community leading the change in regeneration. In Scotland, we have taken action as part of the town centre action plan to encourage charrettes. The Scottish Government provide up to £20,000 to support charrettes, both of which help local communities to bring life back to town centres. The hon. Member for York Central referred. There has to be a range of different things, just malls, to which the hon. Member for Ealing North referred. There has to be a range of different things, whether coffee shops in Strangford or jazz festivals in Maryport. Different things are going on in different parts of the country. There are many different opportunities to offer something different from the large malls, with a bit of additional value to make town centres somewhere that people go to and, more importantly, spend money in. The Government have a big role to play in creating the conditions for that to happen.

**Stephen Pound:** I apologise for my southern ignorance, but I am not familiar with “charrette”. Will the hon. Lady explain what it means?

**Alison Thewliss:** I do not think it is a Scottish word. It is a process by which community organisations come together to discuss their future plans for an area, which then become part of the planning process. The community starts on that and builds it together, which is a positive way of doing things.

**Stephen Pound:** Sounds good to me.

**Alison Thewliss:** It seems to be working quite well. It is fairly new to Scotland, but communities have really embraced it. It needs support from local councils and other people, but it is worth doing.

Hon. Members have stressed the importance of business rates in the mix of encouraging community development. The Scottish Government have also accepted that. The fresh start relief was introduced in 2013 and gives occupiers of shops or offices that have been empty for at least a year a 50% discount on their business rates for 12 months. Other reliefs include new start relief of up to 100% to owners and developers of new build empty properties for up to 18 months to encourage speculative development and investment, and to help to increase the supply of new premises for businesses in communities. These reliefs are provided on top of the small business bonus scheme, which has been excellent in Scotland.

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) mentioned business rates and removing them for small businesses. The small business bonus scheme applies to businesses with a rateable value of £12,500, with a 100% discount for properties that have been empty for at least a year. Other reliefs include new start relief of up to 100% to owners and developers of new build empty properties for up to 18 months to encourage speculative development and investment, and to help to increase the supply of new premises for businesses in communities. These reliefs are provided on top of the small business bonus scheme, which has been excellent in Scotland.

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**Hon. Members** today have referred to opportunities to offer something different for our town centres, not just malls, to which the hon. Member for Ealing North referred. There has to be a range of different things, whether coffee shops in Strangford or jazz festivals in Maryport. Different things are going on in different parts of the country. There are many different opportunities to offer something different from the large malls, with a bit of additional value to make town centres somewhere that people go to and, more importantly, spend money in. The Government have a big role to play in creating the conditions for that to happen.
10.38 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. It is also a pleasure to be asked to sum up such a good debate and to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who made useful points about what happens in Scotland. I thank the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) for securing this debate. It is important because, after all, we all have town centres, high streets and markets in our constituencies, and they affect us all.

The hon Gentleman referred to the Portas review, which I am very conscious of. I remember my days as a local councillor when we all got excited about applying for funding. There was a lot of competition to be a Portas town. Sadly, the impact of the review seems to have fizzled out, which is a shame. As the hon. Gentleman said, there were 28 recommendations, many of which have yet to be implemented. The important point is that the Portas review was a pilot scheme, and normally one would expect action after a pilot scheme. Mary Portas has expressed her own dissatisfaction. She told The Mail on Sunday last year:

“It seems Government isn’t really serious about getting behind the small businesses on our high streets. I really am very frustrated.”

I share her frustration. It was a good scheme. I would like the Government to pick up on the scheme and address some of her recommendations. She made good points about various things, which, according to the speeches made today, are being done almost despite the Portas review—they are being done independently.

The hon. Gentleman talked about charity shops. I am a little concerned about making charity shops the villain of the piece. I think it is better to have a shop that is occupied rather than a shop standing empty on the high street, and charity shops do serve that purpose.

Mark Menzies: I want it to be clear for the record that I do not think that charity shops are the villain of the piece. My point is that where charities, often large national charities, can use their market position to force out independents and prevent them from entering into lease agreements and so on, because they are always offered 10-year leases, it is an uneven market. Charity shops have a very valuable role to play. I just want local councils to be given the power over classification.

Liz McInnes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, which brings us back to the point that local councils need to be given the power to decide what goes in their high streets—a point that nearly everyone who has spoken has made.

Demos did a report in 2013 called “Giving Something Back”. It found that charity shops boosted local businesses and helped to combat unemployment, with more than 80% of the volunteers saying that they were using their shifts to gain retail experience as a path to paid employment. Charity shops also address social isolation. Many staff said that the shops acted as a sort of community centre. Charity shops do have lots of benefits. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees with me on those points. I accept that perhaps it was the wrong choice of words to cast charity shops as the villain of the piece but, as with most things, there are advantages and disadvantages. It is up to councils to provide some balance, and I hope the Government will enable them to do that.

Several hon. Members mentioned the non-renewal of business rate relief. That has been a big issue in the borough of Rochdale—the borough that I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk). He raised the issue of business rate reliefs. The leader of Rochdale Borough Council, Richard Farnell, has said:

“Almost 1,000 shops in Rochdale will be hit with a £1,500 bill because of the government’s sly move to axe business rate relief for retail premises—sneaked through in the autumn budget.”

That could force several small shops, particularly those already struggling, out of business.

Rochdale, like Cockermouth and York, suffered the floods. Many of the small businesses had only just been set up because of the excellent scheme pioneered by Rochdale Council to reduce business rates for start-ups—many of the shops had not been there very long. People can imagine the demoralisation. I went round the day after the floods, and the shop owners were in tears. They just stood there, surveying their ruined stock. They had been trading for only a few months. Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Workington (Sue Hayman), have made the point again and again about Flood Re applying to small businesses. I would appreciate a response from the Minister on those points. In order to keep our high streets viable, it is important to enable businesses to get a reasonable level of insurance against floods.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) gave us a great verbal tour along Pitshanger Lane. He also highlighted the problems of inward-looking shopping malls and out-of-town shopping. I am sure that everyone would agree that those are real issues for the vibrancy and life of our high streets.

I have talked about the business rate relief issue in Rochdale. One innovation by Rochdale Council has been to provide three hours of free parking in the town centre. Again, that was a Portas recommendation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): indicated assent.

Liz McInnes: The Minister agrees with me, which I am pleased about. The point has been made several times that Government cannot dictate to councils how they run their high streets, but they can certainly enable. That could involve giving some assistance to councils and sharing best practice on how to provide free parking without losing out on the funding needed to maintain the car parks. I am sure we could all share best practice in that respect.

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington talked about the social element of our high streets and town centres. That is an important aspect of the issue. This is not just about shops, but about cafés, pubs and bars. Many comments have been made about coffee shops, but they do provide a focal point, a social hub, where people can meet. We need to recognise the new model of high streets: they are much more than just a retail experience.
I want to touch on Sunday trading. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North made the important point that we had a pilot during the Olympic games, when Sunday trading laws were relaxed. That took business away from small shops and did not increase footfall. The same people were spending the same amount of money, but just over longer hours and in the bigger shops, rather than the smaller shops. I therefore reiterate the warning that tinkering with Sunday trading laws is not the way to revitalise our high streets. The Association of Convenience Stores is against it, 67% of the British public support our current Sunday trading hours, and 91% of shop workers are against any relaxation of the laws. Additionally, it was not in the Conservative party manifesto. I think this is an issue that the Government should hold back on. It will not be a popular move.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who unfortunately has had to leave the Chamber for a meeting, talked about the combination of high street retail and online shopping. Our high streets are constantly changing. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North referred to shops becoming showcases for internet shopping. We have to accept that things are changing and we need to modernise. Government policy needs to change to reflect that and we need to give councils the powers to enable our high streets to survive and thrive.

As I said, the impact of internet shopping has been referred to. It was mentioned on the radio this morning that people now have less stuff than they did several years ago. That is due to the digital age and the fact that we do not need so much stuff—we have reached peak stuff. With that in mind, I invite the Minister to respond to what has been a very interesting and lively debate.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chopé. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) on initiating this important debate. It has been an extremely good debate, and I thank him for bringing this matter to the House, because it provides an important opportunity for me to set out the Government’s vision for the future of our high streets and town centres. I am passionate about our high streets and town centres and how important they are to local communities and local economies. This is a critical moment for our town centres, and I am dedicated to giving local authorities, local enterprise partnerships and local communities access to the tools that they need to transform their local areas.

High streets and town centres play an essential role in facilitating the creation of jobs and nurturing small businesses. In fact, a recent Association of Town and City Management report showed that town centres contribute nearly £600 billion to UK plc each year. The Government have taken significant action to support town centres to drive growth. Since 2010, we have helped to create more than 360 town teams, and given more than £18 million to a number of towns. That is on top of a range of steps including supporting the phenomenally successful “Love your local market” campaign.

We have introduced a package of important financial reliefs for small businesses, such as a £1.4 billion package of small business rates relief. We are now reviewing the future structure of business rates. That all goes hand in hand with reforms on parking and the lifting of planning restrictions to increase flexibility of use on high streets, making it easier for high streets to adapt to the needs of their communities. Additional rights now support click and collect, which has not been the enemy of the high street as all had feared. Rather, research is showing that click and collect is driving people back to the high street.

News shows that high streets across the country have fought back valiantly from the great recession. Recent data show positive footfall trends in most locations, and year-on-year retail sales have increased for 33 consecutive months—the longest period of sustained growth since 2008. According to recent statistics, the national vacancy rate is now at a level not seen since December 2009.

Stephen Pound: On that point, has the Minister done any research on the impact of the relaxation of the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987, to which he referred in passing? I have not seen any research on the impact of the relaxation of the use classes order. It was mentioned on the radio this morning that there was a 91% of shop workers are against any relaxation of the laws. Additionally, it was not in the Conservative party manifesto. I think this is an issue that the Government should hold back on. It will not be a popular move.

I am keen to continue celebrating the passion and commitment found in high streets and town centres up and down the country. We have recently celebrated the success of the Great British High Street competition 2015, and have been bowled over by the quantity and quality of the entrants. This year, applications almost doubled as more than 230 high streets applied. I hope that figure will more than double again for next year’s competition and I am looking forward to seeing lots of entries from across the country.

I hope that a number of hon. Members here will promote their local areas. We have had a healthy spirit of competition in the Chamber today. It is good to see Lancashire against Yorkshire. It is not necessarily the war of the roses but many of our local areas competing, which is healthy. Examples include Bishy Road in York, which was the winner of this year’s competition, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned. By working collaboratively, local traders have turned around an area that was once run down and suffering from chronic vacancies into a community hub where local people now shop, meet their friends and tweet about how great it is to go to the famous street parties. That is great news. As I understand it, the traders are even looking into developing a community app to allow people to browse their shops and see whether their friends are nearby on Bishy Road, which is a fabulous idea.

[Liz McInnes]
Public reaction to the Great British High Street awards has been absolutely incredible. Nearly 200,000 people voted in the competition and there were more than 30,000 tweets about it, which shows just how much people value and care for their local high streets.

While there is a lot of good news for high streets, in some places retail spaces that have seen better days remain. The Government cannot and will not rest on their laurels, and I am working hard to develop a range of support to help high streets thrive. I strongly believe that we have reached a crossroads for high streets and town centres. We need to act to make them fit for purpose for today’s consumer.

My vision is for high streets to be vibrant and viable places where people live, shop, use services and spend their leisure time during the day and in the evening. The Government aim to promote mixed high streets with a stronger range of retail and leisure and, crucially, more residential opportunities.

Mr Robin Walker: The Minister is making an excellent and reassuring speech. He mentioned the residential opportunities—the opportunities to live around our high streets. Does he agree that more could be done to support the “living over the shop” agenda, ensuring that we convert more of the empty space above shops into residential accommodation?

Mr Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. As usual, he makes a pertinent and important point. It is certainly something that I am looking into currently. The Government are helping people to achieve their dream of home ownership as Government-backed schemes have helped more than 200,000 households to buy their homes since 2010. High streets and town centres are great places where many young people may well want to get on the ladder to buy their own homes, and it is an important use of the brownfield sites that many of us have in our constituencies.

I am working with retail leaders and the sector through the future high streets forum to deliver a range of initiatives to support high streets. Together with my co-chair, Simon Roberts of Boots, we will be leading work to help high streets to restructure and become more responsive to today’s consumer. John Walden, the chief executive of Argos, is helping the high streets to digitise and we will be looking at ways to help high streets to learn from the finalists of this year’s Great British High Street competition.

In addition, we are looking at what more we can do to strengthen the influence that business improvement districts have over decision making in our local areas.

We have consulted on changes to private parking to encourage people to drive to their local shops without fear of being hit by unfair penalties. I will soon be announcing the outcome of that work.

We are extending Sunday trading hours to help meet the needs of local businesses and communities, and to help them compete as shopping habits change. Online sales continue to grow at a significant rate and we want local retailers to have the flexibility to adjust their hours to enable them to compete.

I do not have time to cover all the points in the debate but I would like to cover some of them. My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde made a pertinent speech in which he mentioned charity shops. Charitable organisations play an important role in all our constituencies and bring in about 200,000 volunteers who work in our communities. I hear what he says about business rates relief for charity shops. The Government have no plans to change that but we are looking carefully at all business rate reliefs. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will report back in the Budget. My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde made an important point about new goods and ensuring that charity retail relief is not abused. He made some sensible comments and there is merit in looking into that.

Hon. Members made a number of points about business rates, and I am sure they have all those comments on the record. The Chancellor will be delivering a Budget shortly and I am sure that the Treasury will have listened intently to today’s debate. The hon. Member for York Central made some important points about Bishy Road including on the importance of strong local leadership, and on local areas creating an identity and offering something that the internet and out-of-town shopping cannot offer. That is important and we all need to understand that local areas need to do that.

A number of other questions were asked and I will, perhaps, write to hon. Members about a number of them. It is quite obvious that this is the latest in a series of debates that shows the importance of high streets and town centres to our local communities. It shows the enthusiasm that hon. Members have for our town centres. I will take away a number of the points raised today because it is a fact that the Government are committed to town centres and high streets, and to looking at ways in which we can help local areas to improve their town centres and high streets for their communities.

10.59 am

Mark Menzies: I thank the Minister for his response. Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Rail Services: East Hertfordshire

11 am

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered rail services in East Hertfordshire.

The railways that serve my constituents encompass six stations and three branches, and they are run by two different companies. We have Gavia Thameslink on what we call the Hertford loop, and the West Anglia route is run by Abellio Greater Anglia. All of our rail lines lead in and out of London, so as in most of Hertfordshire and, indeed, west Essex, they run north-south. Since Dr Beeching, we have had little east-west rail provision in Hertfordshire, which matters because it means that our economic links with London are fundamental. We face London, and our households are therefore increasingly reliant on London’s economy to provide work, which is why the quality of rail services matters so much for the people of Hertford and Stortford.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise this issue as part of my ongoing campaign to ensure that we get a fair deal for my commuters. Today, I will focus on three principal issues: the reliability of the service and the compensation when things go wrong; the state of the rolling stock; and last, although perhaps most fundamental, the capacity of the system, particularly the need for four-tracking into London. I hope that the Minister will respond positively, as she always does, to the points I raise and the questions I ask.

I will start with punctuality and reliability. For many of my constituents, this has been a really bad year for commuting. It is true that punctuality has recently improved, but for many weeks in the past 12 months we have had periods in which, day after day, simply getting in and out of work has been a struggle. People fail to understand the cumulative impact. Of course it makes it difficult for people simply to do their daily work, but it also has a wider impact on family life and on the wider economy, too. The huge variation in performance, often between neighbouring days, simply makes people feel that this is not a service on which they can realistically rely.

Over the past year I have organised face-to-face meetings with the managing director of one of the rail companies, and I pay credit to Mr Burles from Abellio Greater Anglia for being willing to sit down and deal with the concerns of my commuters and his customers.

Although he has accepted blame when his company has got things wrong, he has pointed out, not unreasonably, that 70% of the delays have been due to track or signalling problems, which are of course the responsibility of Network Rail. Although that is true, it is of no comfort to paying passengers from my constituency.

That leads me on to the question of compensation when things go wrong. As part of my campaign for a fair deal, I have lobbied our rail companies to ensure that when trains are delayed, commuters, who have paid up front, must be compensated. I have pressed both companies to make their rules clearer, which they have, and to move to automatic repayments for commuters, as we call the rule on its lines. A present, both Gavia Thameslink and Abellio Greater Anglia offer refunds for delays of 30 minutes or more, but taking into account that total journey times are often only 60 minutes, a 30-minute delay starting point frankly is inadequate, which is why I strongly support the Government’s—indeed the Minister’s—plans for phasing in refunds for delays of 15 minutes or more. When will that rule be introduced, both for Gavia Thameslink and for the new Greater Anglia franchise, which starts in October? For example, will the new 15-minute rule be written into any new franchise agreement? I hope my hon. Friend can update us on that point.

There is also the question of how people claim compensation when things go wrong. Compensation should be automatic for regular commuters. They pay their money up front and, given that the rail company already has their financial details, an automatic electronic refund seems both fair and practical. I am delighted that the consumer body Which?, which has its principal base in my constituency, is now also campaigning for change, and I welcome its recent super-complaint to the regulator. Many hon. Members will know that the rail sector has been dragging its feet on this issue, so I hope that when the regulator replies later this month, we will get firm support for change and a positive reaction from the Department. Will the Minister set out the Government’s approach to that point? I appreciate that she cannot tell us what the answer will be, as we do not yet know the question.

The state of rolling stock on our lines is very poor indeed. We have carriages that go back 20 years or more—indeed, on the Hertford loop we have the old 313s that go back to the late 1970s. It is true that both of the current rail companies have invested substantial sums—many millions of pounds—in refurbishing what they inherited, but all too often we daily face clapped-out carriages with broken heating and very bad seating. Of course, looking at the wider infrastructure implications, trains in such condition will break down more often, so we have a cyclical problem. The key is the franchising system, which sets the standards. The length of any franchise tends to determine both the level and the timing of any investment.

Two years ago, I lobbied hard in this Chamber for new rolling stock to be a clear condition of the Great Northern-Thameslink franchise, including the Hertford loop. With that franchise let, I am pleased to see that Gavia Thameslink is now committed to £200 million-worth of investment, which will deliver some 25 new climate-controlled, six-carriage units from 2018. That is a welcome improvement. Many of my commuters would say that it is a little overdue, but it is welcome none the less. I make the same point for commuters on my West Anglia route. That franchise is due to be awarded during the summer.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this subject, on which, certainly in the case of the West Anglia line, we have worked together closely and in united fashion to try to get improvements for our constituents. Does he agree that, although it is true that most of the problems have stemmed from Network Rail’s area of responsibility, failure of the rolling stock has been increasing lately as it is so tired and old? It is crucial not only for reliability that we have new rolling stock on the West Anglia line but that that rolling stock can take advantage of improvements in the rail line speeds that can be achieved. Those improvements cannot be achieved using the existing rolling stock.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this subject, on which, certainly in the case of the West Anglia line, we have worked together closely and in united fashion to try to get improvements for our constituents. Does he agree that, although it is true that most of the problems have stemmed from Network Rail’s area of responsibility, failure of the rolling stock has been increasing lately as it is so tired and old? It is crucial not only for reliability that we have new rolling stock on the West Anglia line but that that rolling stock can take advantage of improvements in the rail line speeds that can be achieved. Those improvements cannot be achieved using the existing rolling stock.
Mr Prisk: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He knows more about the rail system than I have ever begun to understand. He is right that the link between rolling stock and infrastructure is sometimes not represented properly in decision making, with the net result that the paying passenger loses out.

That is why I would look at the invitation to tender documents for the new franchise. The documents do not specify new rolling stock as a precondition. Personally, I wish they did, but, to be fair, the Government have inserted much higher standards for rolling stock than we currently endure—I use that word carefully. From my reading of the tender documents, which I have here, the bidders would find it pretty difficult, if not impossible, not to include rolling stock in order to fulfil the wider franchise aims.

Following on from what my right hon. Friend said, I say to the Minister that, when considering bids, the Government need to ensure that an applicant has a clear commitment, first, to replacing all the existing stock and, secondly, to securing stock of at least the highest current standards. Most importantly, any new rolling stock resulting from the new franchise should come to the West Anglia route rather than go elsewhere in the franchise area or—even more galling—whizz past us on the Stansted Express. I appreciate that the Minister cannot get ahead of herself in the bidding process, but I hope that she will at least acknowledge those points in her remarks and take them away with her when considering any bids that come forth this summer.

Finally, I come to the capacity of the rail system itself. Frankly, the Hertford loop and the West Anglia lines are full to bursting at commuter time. The population is growing locally, as it is in north London, through Hertfordshire and in Cambridge, yet the capacity of the infrastructure, truth be told, is set largely by passenger numbers determined 20 or 30 years ago. As a result, the whole system is at full stretch, which is why, on the league table of the most overcrowded services, our lines—the West Anglia line and the Hertford loop—are at the top of the list of shame. It is also why when a small problem occurs the whole system often grinds to a halt: there is no slack or room for error.

The West Anglia line should have four tracks between Coppermill Junction and Broxbourne. That would double track capacity into London in a key area where many bottlenecks occur, especially at peak time. My right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) and I have been arguing that case for at least five years; we regarded ourselves as lone voices in the debate, but in the last 18 months we have been joined by colleagues from along the line and across the party political divide. We are now backed by leading business voices, the principal local authorities, the universities and Stansted airport. We have the support of the Mayor of London and Transport for London—a prerequisite for any possibility of a Crossrail 2 development.

I strongly support the Government’s decision to establish a West Anglia taskforce, ably led by my right hon. Friend, who I know is busy preparing the business and financial case for that long-term investment, but I say to the House and to the Minister that as the full benefits of four-tracking are almost certainly some years away, we must also ensure that planned works for the current control period focus on reducing delays and congestion wherever possible. After all, if most delays on the West Anglia line relate to signalling or other infrastructure, we cannot wait until four-tracking is complete to start tackling the problem. Again, I ask the Minister to set out in her response what works are being undertaken by Network Rail over the next few years to improve the reliability of the service on the Hertford loop and the two West Anglia lines. When will those works start to show improvements for my constituency?

Commuters from my constituency pay a lot of money for a service that they all too often find unreliable, unpleasant or just unacceptable. We must ensure that when things go wrong, they are compensated properly and automatically. We must provide them with modern, clean and pleasant carriages in which to travel, and we must invest in infrastructure to ensure that as demand for the service grows, the system can cope and can deliver people to work and home reliably and promptly. As the awarding of the new franchise for Greater Anglia nears, I hope that the Minister will reflect carefully on the points that I have raised and respond to the questions that I have asked.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. It is always a pleasure to respond to debates called by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) and attended assiduously by our right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst), because the arguments are always eloquently made and extremely well informed. I know that both of them have been dedicated for many years to securing the best possible service for their commuting constituents, as am I.

My hon. Friend raised many interesting points, and in the time available I will focus on three of them. On the important issue of compensation, ultimately we all want the same thing: a timely and reliable train service. If we had that, there would be no need for compensation because passengers would not be delayed. We are working hard as a Department and an industry to deliver solutions to the problems he mentioned, particularly failures by Network Rail. He is absolutely right to say that Abellio Greater Anglia has worked extremely hard to solve many of its own internal issues, and of course there are still problems, such as trains breaking down, partly as a result of the ageing fleet, but ultimately everything hinges on the relationship between Network Rail and the operator. We will shortly publish the results of the Nicola Shaw review, which considers some of the fundamental questions about how to join up Network Rail’s activities and those of operators in ways that focus entirely on delivering for both passengers and freight customers. I cannot say more about it, but I look forward to seeing the proposals.

It is important when things do not work that passengers have quick, easy and in many cases automatic access to appropriate compensation. We have some of the most generous compensation schemes in Europe for rail passengers. Through the “delay repay” scheme, we already offer relatively generous levels of compensation: passengers can claim back 50% of their ticket price if they are delayed for 30 minutes or more. However, as my hon. Friend pointed out, given that the average journey time from Hertford East to Liverpool Street is only 49 minutes, that is not necessarily particularly helpful for his constituents.
We want the system to be even better, which is why we committed in our manifesto—the Chancellor has since confirmed that commitment—to reduce the threshold for compensation from 30 minutes to 15 minutes. I intend to announce the details of the change in the next few months. It is always a commercial negotiation when we deal with the rail industry, and we want to ensure that we secure the right deal for taxpayers.

Given the timing of the franchise competition, to which my hon. Friend referred, that will become an in-franchise change for both Abellio Greater Anglia and Govia Thameslink Railway, which already operates as the franchise holder. It is entirely consistent with what we have done in many cases. We intend to roll out the system right across England, so it will become a relevant negotiation to have with franchise operators.

Of course, we are not standing still on compensation. We made some changes last year to the national conditions of carriage so that passengers can claim compensation in cash instead of rail vouchers. As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, the industry must do better. I pay tribute to Which?—a fine consumer-focused campaigning organisation. We are considering the responses to the Which? super-complaint and working with Transport Focus to ensure that operators publicise the compensation that they offer, because the data suggest that only 12% of passengers who are entitled to compensation bother to claim it. That is unacceptable. We want to ensure that the offer is widely publicised and available.

My hon. Friend might be interested to know that last week c2c, which runs the franchises into London from the east, introduced a pençe per minute automatic delay scheme. If a train is delayed for more than two minutes, passengers will start to receive compensation automatically if they are registered for a c2c smartcard ticket. He will be pleased to know that Abellio Greater Anglia, which is also part of the south-east flexible ticketing programme funded by the Government, will introduce its own smartcard next month. It is expected to launch in Cambridge and then roll out across the network, giving the operator the opportunity to introduce a similar system to c2c’s, so that signed-up smartcard users can receive compensation automatically, without having to do anything about it. I am sure that we all welcome that.

Mr Prisk: The Minister’s comments are encouraging. To return to the advent of the new franchise, she described the 15-minute rule as an in-franchise agreement. Does that mean it will be discussed at the time the franchise is let, or will it be negotiated across that period and perhaps introduced later?

Claire Perry: The proposal is to introduce it across all UK franchises at the same time. We will not wait for franchise renewal to come up; it will be introduced. In some cases, where it cannot be introduced as a franchise commitment, it will be funded by Government. We have funding for that, and we are absolutely determined to do it.

The second issue my hon. Friend spoke about is rolling stock. As he pointed out, many of his constituents travel on trains that date from the 1970s, which was a fine decade for fashion but not necessarily a fine one for train quality. Although those trains are still running reliably, which is a tribute to the way they were made and the way they are maintained, they are the oldest electric rolling stock in the country. As both he and our right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden know, the bidders for the new East Anglia franchise have been challenged to specify a massive improvement in the quality of the trains they will run.

In fact, the way we let franchising now is based on both the financial aspects of the bid and the quality that will be delivered. That quality is referred to as the Q score and the weighting for rolling stock quality has never been higher than in this franchise. It is the most significant weighting that has ever been given to rolling stock and we absolutely expect that bidders will include new rolling stock in their bids. That is because, as has been pointed out, the journey time improvements in particular cannot be achieved with the speeds that the existing rolling stock can achieve.

As always, there is a balance to be struck between taxpayers and fare payers, so rather than specify exactly what bidders should do, we have given them the freedom to deliver what they think will give the best performance for passengers. Having visited the CrossCountry franchise only last week and seen the refurbished class 170 trains, I can assure my right hon. and hon. Friends that customers often cannot tell whether a train is new or refurbished to 21st century standards, because in either case it will have the appropriate toilet facilities, and brand new seating and lighting. To all intents and purposes, it looks and feels like a brand new train. That quality is what we are looking for bidders to propose, and my expectation is that the bids will include a high concentration of new rolling stock.

We will also for the first time hold the successful bidder to account contractually for the improvements that they propose for the franchise. We are introducing a contractual customer experience regime, with tough penalties if the operator fails to deliver. At the moment, we have lots of feedback and information, but this will be the first time that we have contractualised those customer experience obligations, with financial penalties if the successful bidder fails to deliver.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, we will see improvements on Great Northern lines, and his constituents will see those improvements even sooner. The deal that was announced last week to replace the wonderful 1976 trains with 25 new six-car trains will bring benefits in 2018. It is worth mentioning that the deal, which is worth just over £200 million, will create jobs right across the UK supply chain from Poole to Hebburn and provide much-needed capacity. My hon. Friend pointed out the capacity problems on the routes, so we can all welcome the improvement.

My hon. Friend is right to raise the question of what can be done about track capacity. Indeed, he and our right hon. Friend are not lone voices. Our hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) campaigns vigorously on this issue, and support is growing. I am well aware of vocal support for a four-track solution to this long-standing problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford will be aware that it is a difficult problem in terms of the layout of the track and what surrounds it, and in terms of the platforming restrictions at Liverpool Street. However, as time goes...
on and as the proposals for developments along the Lea valley come to fruition, the economic case that can be made for this work on the track grows ever stronger.

Although there is no four-tracking solution currently on the cards, I remain interested and I am always happy to discuss the subject with my hon. Friend and the broader group of interested people. However, a three-tracking scheme is being delivered in the current period—it will be done by 2019—between Tottenham Hale and Stratford, which will help to relieve some of the capacity squeeze closer to London.

My hon. Friend invited me to specify other works that will be going on. I do not have the details about other works, but I will write to him to let him know what other enhancements and renewals are taking place on his local lines.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: On that point, although I appreciate that the Minister does not have responsibility for airports, there is a problem. Stansted is the only airport in the London system that has sufficient capacity to handle such demand as cannot be satisfied at Gatwick or Heathrow until the Government have decided where an extra runway will be. The problem is that airlines are reluctant to go to Stansted because of the poor quality of the Stansted Express—indeed, trading standards were expressing an interest and wondering whether or not it is right to call it an express, in view of the congestion on the line. Also, that issue has to be reconciled with the ambitions of Transport for London to run a superior Metro service.

Claire Perry: As always, my right hon. Friend makes a very good point. He will be pleased to know that I think my very first ministerial engagement was to go and welcome the launch of the new Stansted Express, which is the new connection going from Cambridge, which will operate with increased frequency compared with the old service. At that time, I visited Stansted airport, where the new operators of the service take a muscular approach to wanting to deliver more flights and are also very vocal about the restrictions of the rail service. I was pleased that Abellio Greater Anglia was able to work with Stansted to deliver a very early morning service from Liverpool Street, because previously people were going to the airport and sleeping there in order to catch their early morning flights. The growth of Stansted and of the whole region is a very strong supporting point for the underlying investment case for improving track capacity outside Liverpool Street.

Such work always requires us to bring together the voices of the local community, the local MPs, the local airports and the developers who would like to benefit, and to consider the social value that the railway network could bring to people locally if it was improved. It is a difficult case to make but it is certainly one that I would be very interested to hear.

Before I conclude, I wanted to point out that some comfort is being provided by the current passenger satisfaction scores that Abellio Greater Anglia is delivering. In the six months between spring 2015 and autumn 2015, passenger satisfaction rose by six percentage points, which I think is among the highest scores that the company has ever achieved. In particular, there have been improvements in areas that the franchise holder can influence: passenger satisfaction was up by 17% with the company’s dealing with delays; by eight percentage points with its provision of information at stations; and by 11% with its provision of information during journeys. What we want is an operator that is very responsive to the needs of its passengers, so that when things go wrong it is absolutely committed to providing information and compensation.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend for raising such important matters. I feel that we are on the cusp of a rail renaissance in this country. We have a Government who are committed to spending almost £40 billion during the next five years on improving the rail network, but that money ultimately has to be seen to benefit customers; it will all be wasted if customers do not see and feel the benefit of it.

I am happy that I have been able to set out for my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend some assurances around the introduction of the compensation offer at 15 minutes and around the fact that new trains have already been contracted to run on the Great Northern lines. Also, I confidently expect that the rolling stock offer that bidders on the AGA franchise will put forward will be better than anything that people in the constituencies of both my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend have seen up to now.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.
Local Government Funding: North-East

[SIR DAVID AMESS in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local government funding in the North East.

It is a pleasure to serve again under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am grateful for the opportunity to have this debate, which I applied for so that I could set out the impact of the local government funding settlement on my constituency and give colleagues from across the north-east the opportunity to make clear to the Minister the consequences for their constituencies of the decisions that he and his colleagues have made.

I welcome the Minister—I am glad that he is here to listen—but I am disappointed. I think it would have been appropriate to have the northern powerhouse Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton South (James Wharton) here, given his stake in the region. His constituency lies in the north-east so his constituents will also be subject to the effects of the Government’s decisions. It would have been good to have the opportunity to tell him how we feel. However, I notice that the Minister is making notes and I am sure that he is all ears and will take back the clear message that we will be sending via him.

May I just tell the Minister a little about the north-east? If his colleague was here I would obviously not need to do this. We are very proud of the north-east. We love the north-east.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):

My mum is from the north-east.

Jenny Chapman: Well, my mum is from Kent but I know bugger all about it. [Laughter.]

I want to convey to the Minister that we are incredibly proud of our region. Everyone who lives in the north-east is proud of it. We have a strong industrial heritage and we have an exciting future ahead of us. We are hard workers. We have a beautiful landscape and a wonderful coastline. We have vibrant cities and world heritage sites. We are keen to see the region progress and grow as we know it can, but that needs the support of a Government who understand the north-east, and I do not think that that is what we have.

Alongside all those wonderful things in the north, we have some challenges. I want to say a few things about ageing, and I know that the Minister might also want to refer to it in his response. Life expectancy is lower for men and women in the north-east than anywhere else in the country. For boys born between 2012 and 2014, life expectancy at birth was highest in the south-east and lowest in the north-east. For girls, it is the same: life expectancy at birth was highest in the south-east and lowest in the north-east, where they will live only another 20 years.

The strategic review of health inequalities in England post-2010—the Marmot review—concluded that health inequalities stem from avoidable inequalities of income, education and employment and that they are not inevitable and can be reduced. I think that local authorities have a key role to play in that reduction.

Let me give some examples. According to IPPR North, transport spending in the north-east is £5 per head compared with £2,600 per head in London—520 times less. There are 33 projects in the pipeline for London and the south-east compared with just three in the north-east. The Government need to look at how they evaluate projects and decide where to invest. Our transport infrastructure, including the quality of rolling stock, in the north-east is clearly not good enough compared with that in other parts of the country.

According to the latest Office for National Statistics report on unemployment by region, it is highest in the north-east at 8.7%. The largest decrease in UK workforce jobs in the last three months of 2015 was in our region—we lost 26,000 jobs. According to the Department for Education’s “NEET Quarterly Brief”, the proportion of 16 to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training is highest in the north-east, at 20.1%—that is 59,000 young people. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, average wealth in property and assets is lowest in the north-east, where it is half that in the south-east, and financial wealth is four times greater in the south-east. Those are real issues of inequality and opportunity that we think that local authorities are well placed to assist in addressing.

According to the Department for Education, the north-east and the north-west jointly have the highest rate of looked-after children, at 82 per 100,000. The lowest rate is in outer London, the east and the south-east, so we bear the brunt of that burden too. According to the 2011 census, the day-to-day activities of 22% of people in the north-east are limited by a long-term health problem or disability, compared with 18% for England and Wales—remove Wales and the figure is probably even lower. The census also shows that 11% of people in the north-east provide unpaid care for someone with an illness or a disability—a figure that is higher than the national average—and that the north-east has the highest proportion of socially rented accommodation, at 15%.

The point I am trying to make is about need. The Government do not take sufficient account of the varying degrees of need across the country, and councils serving communities with the highest levels of need are not being supported.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and I congratulate her on securing an important debate. I would hate to pre-empt her, but while she is setting out clear examples of where the figures in the north-east are higher than in the rest of the country, I want to say that one of the most shocking things is this: the Government’s own figures show that councils’ spending power per household between 2010 and 2020 will fall by the highest amount in the north-east—by £465.51 per head, compared with £1,544.07 in the south-east. My hon. Friend is setting out the picture of why the north-east requires additional spending and those figures stand in stark contrast.
Jenny Chapman: My hon. Friend has just encapsulated my argument, neatly making the point that I am sure all Labour Members present will be making to the Minister. We feel strongly that we could, with the right support and the right collaboration with the Government and our local authorities, make a real difference to those numbers. Things were going in the right direction—that is what we are trying to get across—but we cannot do it on our own. We know that all Governments fiddle with the formulae to suit their political ends—I am not naive about that. We called for the debate because this Government are doing that in such a blatant manner.

In my home town of Darlington, residents are united in their disgust at what the Government are doing to our town. In a borough of some 100,000 people, almost 9,000 have already signed a petition initiated by my trusty local newspaper, The Northern Echo. The petition reads:

“The Northern Echo is calling on the Government to reconsider its funding formula which has led Darlington Borough Council to implement savage spending cuts that threaten the fabric of the town. These cuts affect not only the most vulnerable but will impact on every corner of the borough.”

It is unusual to find a local paper quite so squarely in support of the local council, and how right The Northern Echo is. I am so proud that that historic campaigning title is based in my constituency and is campaigning for fair funding for the north-east. It used to give the Labour Government a hard time, too, but it is completely clear that the decisions that this Government have made are disproportionately and unjustifiably harming the people of the north.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I represent part of the rural area of Darlington borough. Will she explain how unsubtle the funding formula for local government has become? Surrey has received £24 million of the £300 million transitional grant, but Darlington Borough Council is facing cuts of £20 million to £22 million.

Jenny Chapman: It is extraordinary, and the debate on the funding settlement that we had in the main Chamber brought it home to anyone who still thought that the Government were acting fairly. Government Back Benchers were saying, “I was going to vote against this, but now we have got our transitional funding I think I will go through the Lobby with the Minister.” It was completely bare-faced. One might have thought that the Government would be more subtle.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I represent a constituency that is predominantly rural. Government Members were being insulting and patronising when they tried to explain to us that they had deprivation in their parts of the country. The difference between our rural areas and the ones they were talking about is that ours tend to vote Labour.

Jenny Chapman: Although my hon. Friend was being a little tongue in cheek at the end, she makes a very good point. In the debate in the Chamber, we heard many Government Members telling us, “There is rural deprivation, too, don’t you know?” Actually, in the north-east we have many rural areas. I have them just outside my constituency. The county of Durham is predominantly rural. Government Members were being insulting and patronising when they tried to explain to us that they had deprivation in their parts of the country too. The difference between our rural areas and the ones they were talking about is that ours tend to vote Labour.

Let me turn to the dry numbers and their impact—I will be talking about Darlington; other colleagues will talk about their constituencies. The reduction in Government funding in real terms between 2010 and
2020 will be £44 million, in the context of a net budget of £87 million. The provision of statutory services costs £87.5 million. The council has been able to fund £2.5 million of discretionary services a year for the next four years by using all its available revenue balances. Balances that have been wisely saved are now being used to protect front-line services, and what happens after that? That is what I would like to know.

What do the numbers mean in the real world? Darlington is a historic market town. It was the birthplace of the railways. We have got good schools, affordable housing, good rail transport links and a fierce sense of identity. We are proud of where we live. We are innovators. We have developed everything from steam locomotives to story sacks for pre-school kids. We survived the worst of the ’80s Tory Government through a diverse economic base, but these new challenges are not like anything we have previously had to endure.

Darlingtonians are a frugal lot. We like our council tax low and we like our council to make the money stretch as far as possible. Darlington was among the first authorities to share back-office services with another authority. It now shares its ICT services with Stockton. The joint project with Stockton cut costs by a third—equal to £15 million over 10 years. Darlington also provides services to other councils, such as Richmondshire, and to academies across the north. The council is soon to provide information and communications technology to Northumberland County Council. It is not just sitting back and waiting for the Government to supply. It is a good, innovative, lean authority. Darlington has only two libraries, and they are both to go. Cockerton will shut entirely, and the historic Crown Street library, which was a gift to the town from the Pease family, will be moved into the town’s only sports centre, the Dolphin Centre. No one knows what will become of the library building. The Dolphin Centre is about to get increasingly busy, as all our children’s centres are to be moved in there as well. It is children who are likely to bear the brunt of the unjust funding decisions.

Charities across the north-east are warning that local government funding cuts are “hacking away”—their words—at services specifically aimed at children. Funding for early-help services in the north-east is expected to be cut by 73%. How short-sighted and stupid can you get? The “Losing in the long run” report, published by Action for Children, the National Children’s Bureau and the Children’s Society, says that children and families will be left without the early support that often stops their problems spiralling out of control.

The services I am talking about include children’s centres, teenage pregnancy support, short breaks for disabled children, information and advice for young people, and family support. Those services, although vital, are not statutory. I find myself hoping that someone will apply for a judicial review to determine exactly what a service for young people and children, or even a library service, should look like. What does the law say a library service really is? Otherwise we will continue to see provision eroded until it resembles the barest skeleton of something that could be described as a service. We are seeing reductions in provisions of £2 million and Oxfordshire gets £9 million—but there is nothing for Darlington, or for Durham, Newcastle, Sunderland, Gateshead, North Tyneside and South Tyneside. Northumberland will receive £600,000 extra, as well as £4.2 million from the rural grant.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. The Minister clearly said that that money was granted to Northumberland because of lobbying from his Northumberland MPs. Is she aware that Middlesbrough, Knowsley, Hull, Liverpool and Manchester, the five most deprived councils in the country, have received nothing under the grant, while Hart, Wokingham, Chiltern, Waverley and Elmbridge, the five least deprived, collectively received £5.3 million? The difference is stark.

Jenny Chapman: It is shameful.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Indefensible.
Jenny Chapman: It is indefensible, as my hon. Friend says. The Minister really needs to reflect on the decisions he has made. While those councils and the residents in those areas will benefit from the additional money, it is the looked-after children and the older people—the people who rely on council services in our region—who pay the price, and that is wrong.

Phil Wilson: I do not know whether my hon. Friend is aware, but revenue spending per household in Darlington from 2011-12 to 2019-20 will be reduced by £1,642. In Durham the figure is £1,600, and in Gateshead it is nearly £2,000. Does that not prove how brutal and unsubtle the cuts are for the north-east of England, when we compare them with what is happening in the south?

Jenny Chapman: Absolutely it does—I have the same numbers here, which I am happy to give to the Minister.

In a previous debate, the Minister tried to imply that Darlington was getting £2,000 a year extra. If he makes that same claim again, he is completely wrong. I have checked, double-checked and triple-checked with my director of finance, and the Minister is completely wrong. I advise him not to say that again and to ask his officials to get back to the local authorities and find out what the actual numbers are.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): I feel a little embarrassed coming in here when Northumberland is getting £600,000. However, I am told that it will all go to the rural area of Northumberland where two Tory MPs sit.

Jenny Chapman: At least there is some consistency in approach between the Government and their local representatives. This was a straightforward bribe to Tory MPs threatening to vote against the Government’s financial settlement for local authorities and it worked. Members have spoken openly about being persuaded to support the Government’s plans following the receipt of transitional funds. This is the worst kind of pork-barrel politics I have ever seen.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Minister might start to talk about the wonderful devolution deals that we are about to get in the north-east of England. In the Tees valley, we get £15 million a year for 30 years, whereas Aberdeen gets twice that over half a century.

Jenny Chapman: No, it will not. I really wish the combined authority well, and I will work hard to support it, because we need to make these things work. However, I am not overly optimistic about the impact of that initiative on the outcomes for the people I represent. I do not know how to put this politely, in the phrase that I am looking for, but it is too little, it is peripheral and it is not widely supported in the community. We are having a mayor for a place that, to most people who live in my constituency or my hon. Friends’ constituencies, does not really exist, so we are not putting all our hope in that particular initiative.

The Government have taken support away from areas that need it most and that are least able to make up the shortfall through business rates or council tax increases—areas, most shockingly of all, whose only crime is to be guilty of voting Labour.

2.58 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) on securing this crucial debate.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the provision of good local services can make or break communities. Everybody benefits from good local provision, and many people rely heavily on having access to council services. They can be a civilising force for good: keeping the streets clean, providing a pleasant and safe local environment, helping to spread knowledge and culture through the provision of libraries and arts services, and keeping the vulnerable safe through high-quality and caring adult and children’s services. In my area of the north-east, where economic activity and prosperity are perhaps not as advanced as in other areas, the provision of good local services is needed more than ever. Such provision requires adequate funding for local authorities, but it is fair to say that in this debate and elsewhere the Labour party has demonstrated conclusively that good, adequate funding for local services in the north-east simply is not happening.

Areas of deprivation have suffered more cuts to council funding than more prosperous areas. Inner-London boroughs, metropolitan areas and, yes, councils in the north-east have seen disproportionately harsh cuts. In the last Parliament, Hartlepool Borough Council’s grant was reduced by 40%. In the 2010 index of multiple deprivation, Hartlepool is the 24th most deprived local authority out of 354 areas in Britain. That is an improvement from the IMDs of 2007 and 2004, in which my borough was, respectively, the 23rd and 14th most deprived local authority, but we still have enormous challenges in Hartlepool, as we do elsewhere in the north-east.

Given the austerity programme since 2010 and the severe knocks to the local economy brought on by crises in the oil and gas and steel industries—we had an important debate on the steel industry in the Chamber last night; the Minister responsible for the northern powerhouse could not be bothered to turn up to that either—further deprivation in my borough and elsewhere is inevitable. I see it every day in desperate correspondence from my constituents.

Anna Turley: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Wright: Yes, but before I do, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work she has done for the steel industry. Her area, like mine, has suffered enormous rises in unemployment. In Hartlepool, unemployment is two and a half times the national average; I dread to think what it is in Redcar.

Anna Turley: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s tribute to our area’s fight. Does he share my dismay that although it is nice of the Government to give us £50 million towards retraining and reskilling, that will not even come close to covering the £90 million our local authorities have lost over 10 years? The local authorities would have been in a far stronger position to react to a crisis had the Government not stripped them to the bone.

Mr Wright: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about services having been stripped to the bone: there is nothing left to cut. Local authorities can really only
consider what they can manage to do and the minimum amount required of them in respect of statutory services.

Along with other local authorities, Hartlepool had a tough deal in the last Parliament, but it is going to get tougher in this one. Hartlepool Borough Council was established when unitary authority status was granted 20 years ago. The coming financial year is set to be the most difficult that the borough has ever faced, with a budget that is £8.274 million less than last year, representing a year-on-year reduction of 19.6%. That reflects the combined impact of a further £4.474 million cut in Government revenue support grant, which is a year-on-year reduction of 19.7%, and the permanent reduction in the rateable value of the nuclear power station—the Minister has heard me discuss this before—which reduces business rates income by £3.8 million year on year, in perpetuity, equating to a reduction of 19.4%. Over the lifetime of this Parliament, to the year 2019-20, Hartlepool faces a combined settlement funding assessment cut of 27%. Every single local authority in the north-east will experience cuts, from 35% in Northumberland to 25% in Sunderland. By the end of this Parliament, Hartlepool, and local authorities in the north-east in general, will have experienced nine consecutive years of funding cuts. That is unprecedented.

My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington mentioned further pressures on health and education, where we have challenges in our region. Will the Minister comment on public health funding budgets, to which further cuts will be made over the next four years? Additional cuts will be phased in at 2% in 2016-17, 2.5% in 2017-18, and 2.6% in 2018-19 and 2019-20. On top of that, from 2017-18 the Government will cut £600 million from the national education services grant, which equates to a cut of 74% over the lifetime of this Parliament. That will have enormous effects on how local authorities can help education provision in the north-east.

From 2017-18, the national schools funding formula will also affect the council’s revenue budget—perhaps not directly, but it will have a negative impact on Hartlepool’s schools and reduce the public funding available in my borough. That will mean that the local authority will have to step up to the plate and try to provide further help, which it cannot provide because it does not have the available resources.

Alex Cunningham: When I head towards my flat in the evening, I see all this tremendous building in London. One of these blocks of flats is 50 storeys high and is probably generating millions of pounds in additional council tax—certainly hundreds of thousands. We would have to build on almost every single square foot of land in Stockton to generate that sort of income, which is a further illustration of how the south has it good in being able to generate cash but we do not.

Mr Wright: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour makes an important point about something that I was going to come to. The 100% retention of business rates does not help the north-east and will not help the finances of local authorities in the region. Whereas Westminster City Council, for example, could pave its streets with gold, we in the north-east will suffer enormously as a result of the 100% retention of business rates.

The switching off of the nuclear power station in my constituency for reasons of health and safety, which was quite right, means that my local authority is incredibly vulnerable to the loss of business rates. Given the make-up and structure of the north-east economy, large manufacturing businesses could end up putting local authority finance under further pressure as a result of the lack of help. Nowhere has that been exemplified more than in the closure of the SSI steelworks in Redcar.

Anna Turley: Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council has lost £10 million of business rates a year. On top of the impact of the cuts on services, we have lost a huge amount of business rates. If that is how the Government see the future, it is going to be deeply unfair for areas such as ours.

Mr Wright: My hon. Friend is right. Will the Minister respond by telling us how that will be addressed? In theory, the 100% retention of business rates is a good policy, but in practice it will further devastate local authority funding in the north-east. What sort of redistributions or transitional arrangements will be put in place for areas such as Hartlepool or Redcar to prevent that from happening?

I want the Minister to answer directly one key point. In the previous Parliament, the coalition Government had a policy of council tax freezes. Hartlepool was the only authority in the Tees valley that implemented a frozen council tax regime for five years. Can the Minister confirm that, as a result of Government policy, that is now at an end? Is it now the Government’s formal position to ensure that council tax will go up by 1.9%? With the social care precept adding another 2%, that will mean that, starting from April, council tax payers in Hartlepool and elsewhere will face a rise of 3.9%, which they cannot afford to pay. Is the Government’s policy producing that?

In conclusion, my area has faced devastating cuts to local authority services in the past few years, but we ain’t seen nothing yet given what is going to happen during this Parliament. We are going to see the vulnerable become ever more vulnerable and our potential going unfulfilled and unrealised as a direct result of the gerrymandering in the Government’s policy on council tax funding and allocation. It is a disgrace and the Government should think again to make sure that our areas can thrive.

3.8 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) on securing this important debate. She made an outstanding speech and has given her parliamentary colleagues from throughout the region the opportunity to make the case for our local authorities, which have been hardest hit by the Conservative Government’s spending cuts. She has also given us the chance to lobby the Minister and perhaps bring about the same outcome that we have heard was achieved by the Minister’s Conservative colleagues in Northumberland. If we can secure the same outcome as they did, this will have been a very productive debate indeed. I will not hold my breath, though.

The Prime Minister’s intentions for the north-east are well documented, going well back before the 2010 general election.
Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the questions the Minister must answer is why none of Durham, Darlington, Hartlepool, Stockton, Sunderland or Newcastle benefited from any of the Government’s rural funding? My constituency covers 300 sq km and the neighbouring constituency in Durham is the same size, yet we got none of the extra rural funding. Given the levels of deprivation, we would like an explanation of why that is the case.

Mrs Hodgson: I hope the Minister will explain. Perhaps the special circumstances are that, unlike Durham, Northumberland has two Conservative MPs. The unfairness speaks for itself.

Alex Cunningham: I do not know whether my hon. Friend is correct in assuming that it is something to do with Tory MPs. We have a Tory MP in Stockton—the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Stockton South (James Wharton)—and we got nothing.

Mrs Hodgson: That says more about that Minister. His lobbying was obviously not as successful as that of his colleagues in Northumberland.

The Prime Minister is on the record saying, in an interview with Jeremy Paxman before the 2010 election, that the north-east and Northern Ireland are the two areas where his planned public sector cuts would have the greatest impact. True to his word, when he walked into Downing Street in 2010, propped up by the Liberal Democrats, he began implementing some of the deepest and most devastating cuts our region has ever seen. I would hazard that they are even worse than the cuts under Margaret Thatcher, which I never would have thought possible.

Here we are again: councils in some of the poorest parts of the country are having to cut services back to the bare bones. The fat went long ago. In most of our region, especially the coalfield communities, some of which I represent, there was for many years trepidation about what the Conservatives would do if they were ever in power again. It is with no surprise or pleasure that we gather here to point out that the Government have truly lived up to those dire expectations. After six years of belt-tightening, Opposition Members listened with disbelief as the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government stood at the Dispatch Box last month and announced a local government settlement of £300 million of transitional funding. 85% of which will benefit Tory councils that have not faced anywhere near the funding cuts meted out to Labour councils. Labour councils are expected to work out the sums for the rest of the country.

Tomorrow, my local council, Sunderland, will pass its budget for the 2016-17 financial year. It must find £46 million of savings this year and a total of £110 million by the end of this Parliament, on top of the £207 million that it had to find during the last Parliament. That means that the council has a total of £290 million to spend by 2020, compared with the £607 million it had in 2010, before the Conservatives came to power in 2010. That is less than 50% of its pre-2010 budget. That is not trimming, belt-tightening or streamlining; it is an attack—a full-scale assault. So much for the rhetoric of a northern powerhouse. Northern poorhouse, more like.

Of the £290 million of spending power that Sunderland has left, £182 million is reserved for statutory adult social care and children’s services. The remaining £108 million will have to pay for all other services, including waste collection and disposal, libraries, museums, housing, business investment, and sport and leisure. Those wide-ranging services need proper investment to be suitable for public access, but with such a small budget for those services, it is obvious that the council will struggle to maintain the high standard that our local communities deserve and expect.

Significant cuts will also have to be found within the needs-based funding elements, including children’s services. An 8% per annum cut is expected in the early intervention budget on top of the 50% cut to early intervention services since 2010. Children’s services and early intervention are such important areas. If funded correctly, they can mitigate greater costs further down the line by preventing children from becoming adults with multiple issues. The Government’s policy is so short-sighted.

No doubt the Minister will talk about devolving the collection of local business rates. Labour supports that policy in principle, but in practice it will further ingrain unfairness into an already unfair system. He may also talk about the 2% increase in council tax to fund social care as a means for councils to bring in additional funding. For low-tax councils such as Sunderland, such measures will not bring in the funding they require to continue to provide the local services that we rely on. It is estimated that the 2% for social care alone will bring in only £1.5 million for Sunderland, but our local social care demands are approximately £3 million. Where does the Minister think the additional funding should be found? This is one of the greatest public policy crises that we face in this country. For Sunderland, the prognosis remains bleak for the near future. There is no reprieve or support on the horizon from the Government.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about the ingrained inequalities, which the Government’s policies will deepen. Is she aware that Newcastle City Council estimates that the 2% council tax precept will raise £1.4 million a year, whereas it faces a spending shortfall of £15 million? It is a simple mathematical calculation, and it does not add up.

Mrs Hodgson: I often wonder whether the Government’s calculators and experts still functioning when it comes to some of these numbers. They seem to have dyscalculia—numerical dyslexia—when working out the sums for the north-east, but they are not troubled by it when working out the sums for the rest of the country.
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I apologise for being late, Sir David. I have been chairing the Backbench Business Committee. The 2% rise for social care will raise about £1.4 million in my authority, yet of the £300 million cuts mitigation fund that the Secretary of State established, £300,000 is going to the north-east of England, all of which is going to Northumberland. Some £114 million is going to eight shire counties surrounding London, all of which are Conservative-controlled. No formula can explain the rationale for that.

Mrs Hodgson: The only rationale is political bias. That is what we are trying to highlight. It is obvious what has gone on; the figures speak for themselves. The Secretary of State’s brazen audacity in outlining the cuts at the Dispatch Box last month and the brass-necked nature of that announcement beggar belief. It shows how little the Government care. He knew that it would be seen through, but it did not bother him.

We have heard time and time again about the deep unfairness of the Government’s financing of local authorities in the north-east and other unitary councils across the country, but Ministers still do not understand the impact it will have on the most vulnerable in our communities. It cannot be ignored any longer. I hope that the Minister will heed our words. We are a strong, collective voice from the north-east arguing for fairer funding. I hope he will assure hon. Members present that he will take our concerns back to his Department and the Secretary of State to ensure that he reconsiders the devastating, short-sighted decisions of his Department on our region. I am sure that the Secretary of State will understand—as we have heard, he is a local lad from Middlesbrough. If he does not get it, what hope have we?

The rural indicator was a measure that the Government brought in to try to compensate for rurality. There could not be a more rural county than County Durham; but what did it get out of it? Not one penny. I do not object to Northumberland, which includes the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Mr Campbell), getting some extra funding, but why did that county get it? It is because it has two Conservative Members of Parliament. We are now in a situation where funding is allocated on the basis of what the local electors decided. The Government are punishing electors where funding is allocated on the basis of what the local electors decided. The Government are punishing electors in the north-east for voting Labour. We would expect that in a totalitarian dictatorship, not in a democracy such as ours.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) on obtaining the debate.

There was a time when the Conservative party believed in local government, and it had a long tradition of supporting it. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) highlighted the effect that the Thatcher Administration had on our region, but one thing that Margaret Thatcher did not do was devastate local government as the present Government are doing. Many people in my constituency say “They are as bad as Thatcher”. No, they are worse than Thatcher. They do not believe in the state as we do. They take the view that local government should just deliver statutory services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington eloquently outlined, that is what the people of Darlington will end up with—an authority with the ability to deliver just statutory services. Everything else that we have for generations taken for granted that councils should deliver will go by the bye.

What makes it worse is that the Government are in the most blatant way allocating funding to pacify voices within their own party. I am not sure that it will pacify them for long, because I do not know how they will protect the areas in question in the long term, given the reductions that the Government still have in line—a cut of some 56% for the Department for Communities and Local Government. However, at the moment that is clearly what they are doing.

Where, in the core spending and transitional arrangements, are the lowest reductions being made? What are those very deprived areas? They are Surrey, Hampshire, North Yorkshire and Devon. We have a ludicrous situation of North Yorkshire getting a 2.5% increase and Surrey a 1.5% increase in core spending. A 2.5% increase in our core spending in Durham would mean an additional £10 million of funding. On the figures for core spending powers and cuts in 2016-17, Durham will have minus 4.1%, Newcastle minus 4.4% and Sunderland minus 4.3%. Surrey will have a 1% reduction and my favourite place, Wokingham, a 0.4% reduction.

I think it has been the understanding of all Governments, irrespective of political make-up, since the second world war, that need has to be taken into account. The idea that it is possible to equate the health problems and social deprivation of the north-east and, I must say, inner-city areas in parts of some London boroughs and the north-west with pressures in Surrey and Wokingham, is nonsense. In the figures for the final settlement for 2016-17, the core spending per dwelling figure for Durham county council is £1,608; for Surrey it is £1,661. It may be thought that that is not much higher, but no account is taken of the demands of an ageing population in Durham, and its higher unemployment and social care needs. If the district councils in Surrey are taken into account, the core spending per dwelling figure goes up to more than £2,000. I am sorry, but it cannot be right that one of the wealthiest parts of the country is getting more expenditure than some of the most deprived communities.

The rural indicator was a measure that the Government brought in to try to compensate for rurality. There could not be a more rural county than County Durham; but what did it get out of it? Not one penny. I do not object to Northumberland, which includes the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell), getting some extra funding, but why did that county get it? It is because it has two Conservative Members of Parliament. We are now in a situation where funding is allocated on the basis of what the local electors decided. The Government are punishing electors in the north-east for voting Labour. We would expect that in a totalitarian dictatorship, not in a democracy such as ours.

Mr Campbell: Could we press the Communities and Local Government Committee to have an inquiry, covering the whole gamut of this issue?

Mr Jones: I would welcome that, but I remind my hon. Friend that this lot do not care. What they did in the previous Parliament shows that. They are small state Conservatives who frankly do not give a damn about the north-east, because it means nothing to them electorally.

One of the biggest needs of, and pressures on, most of our councils is social care. The Government have announced that councils can charge 2% extra on council tax. That will raise a lower amount in Durham than in Surrey, because about 55% of properties in County Durham are in band A. The idea that that is a panacea that will answer the social care issue is not true. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) demonstrated the problems that Newcastle City Council faces, and the situation will be duplicated in all north-east and inner-city councils, which have huge pressures on them.
Ian Mearns: We have done the mapping in my local authority, and if we cut 100% of all the services by 2021—refuse collection, grounds maintenance and everything that councils do—we will still have to make cuts in adult social care and children's services to balance the books, once revenue support grant has been totally removed and the impact of the localisation of business rates kicks in.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds, I remind the House that three hon. Ladies still want to speak, as well as the Opposition spokesperson and the Minister who will respond. The debate finishes at 4 o'clock, so I hope that colleagues will bear that in mind.

Mr Kevan Jones: My hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) makes a pertinent point. We will end up with councils that deliver core statutory services, and even then they will be under pressure.

When the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) was Secretary of State, he argued that somehow we could make the savings by having fewer pot plants in council departments, or by cutting staff numbers. I must tell the Minister that every council in the north-east has made back-office efficiencies. That will not enable them to meet the figures. For example, from 2011 to 2020 Durham will have lost £288 million from its budget. It is ludicrous to think we can make that up. I am sorry that the Secretary of State is not here; previously he has accused councils of hoarding large balances, but that is a way of diverting attention. I will explain the situation in Durham. It has £220 million in reserves. However, only £30 million of that is actual reserves, in the sense of the 5% that, when I was in local government, local councils needed. The rest is allocated for other things, such as redundancies and things that will take place against a budget of more than £865 million. Let us knock on the head the nonsense that northern councils are awash with large reserves. As my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington demonstrated, they are down to the bone. The other thing is that reserves can be used only once. The Government’s idea about a way of somehow mixing revenue and capital is economically illiterate.

I want to finish on devolution, because we will no doubt get a load of guff from the Minister about it. The devolution being put forward for the north-east is a devolution of responsibilities without the cash to go with it; £30 million is on offer for the north-east so-called mayoral model. If the cuts to public health funding go forward as predicted, Durham alone will lose £20 million a year.

I noticed last week that a Conservative, Mr Jeremy Middleton, announced his candidacy for mayor of the north-east. Strangely, he said:

“I won't be asking people to vote for me because I'm a Conservative. I'll be asking them to vote for me because I'm the right man for the job.”

I had a look at his website this morning, and he has also said that through negotiation with Whitehall he will deliver “a fair financial settlement with similar public funding per head as Scotland”.

I challenge him to state why he has sat quietly for the past six years without saying a single thing about local government finance being butchered in the north-east. He is a friend of the Chancellor, a former Conservative candidate—he thankfully failed in the by-election against my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright)—and has been an apologist for this Government. I ask the people of the north-east to remember that when and if we actually get this ludicrous situation with a mayor.

I am fully supportive of the idea of devolution, but devolution of responsibility without the funding, which is what this is, is not the way forward. Councils in the north-east are facing a crisis and there is only one explanation. It lies with the Government who are protecting their own areas in a party political way while not giving a damn about Labour-voting areas in the north-east of England.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. I am having to impose a time limit of three minutes, which is unsatisfactory. I ask colleagues to resist making interventions.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) not only on securing this debate, but on her moving speech that set the scene of the reality of life in north-east.

Due to the Chancellor’s cuts, local government funding will drop by a quarter in real terms by 2020. I will not go through all the figures again, but the Prime Minister’s area of Oxfordshire will see a funding increase, as will Hampshire and Surrey. The disparity in funding between southern Tory areas and northern Labour areas represents the most blatant political manoeuvring that I have seen or read about in the western world. In succeeding to buy off potential Tory rebels with the transitional pot of money for rural areas, the Government are hitting my constituents, and those of my hon. Friends, very hard. Sunderland has had to make savings and reductions totalling £207 million since 2010-11, and it is projected that it will be required to make further reductions totalling £115 million by 2020. That is a total of £322 million over a 10-year period. Given that the council’s gross budget was £784 million in 2010-11, the reductions equate to 26% to date and 41% by 2020 when compared with the starting budget.

The cuts will be exacerbated by two elements of the local government finance settlement. The first is business rates. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) outlined the reality of the difference in what business rates can raise, and I am still waiting for a Minister to explain to me and my constituents how that will be done in a fair and reasonable manner. The TUC’s Frances O’Grady said that “by devolving business rates without any national safeguards, regional inequalities will get wider”.

They will. Adult social care is the other area, and it is a massive problem under this regime. Sunderland City Council has lost £207 million from its budget in the past six years and is braced for further cuts of £115 million by 2020.

I wonder what the Minister can say today. I wait with bated breath. The political shenanigans of the budget settlement will bear heavily on the people of the north-east, the people I am proud to represent as a Labour Member, and the people I care about. The Opposition will not let that happen without a fight and without exposing exactly what this Government are doing.
Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) on securing this important debate. Is it not about time that this Government admitted that plans for the so-called northern powerhouse are just empty rhetoric? A recent report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that 10 of the UK’s most struggling cities are in the north. The Government are driving a greater wedge, not building the promised bridge, between the north and south. Not a single town from the south of England is among those struggling areas.

Council spending power per household has fallen by £74 in the South Tyneside Council area, which is significantly higher than the £43 average fall in spending power across English councils as whole. My council was also one of the eight authorities in the north-east to receive no transitional funding whatsoever, yet the Government have managed to find the money to offer a bribe to MPs representing wealthy southern shires. South Tyneside has suffered a 45% budget cut since 2010.

Many people will know that I was a councillor between 2010 and 2013 before coming to this place. I was a cabinet member on the council and cannot begin to stress how painful it was to sit surrounded by paperwork and job titles and agonise over who may be losing their job or what service might be axed next. I wonder whether the Minister has ever had to stand face-to-face with vulnerable and elderly people and their families and witness the total despair on their faces when they are told that their care package was being cut or that their care home was closing, because I have and I remember it well.

The chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy says that the next few years are going to be “so difficult” and “so tough” that councils will be in total deficit. Is the Government’s final aim to make councils bankrupt? That is the direction in which they are heading. It is the wrong direction. The 2015 index of multiple deprivation shows that South Tyneside’s overall deprivation score rose by just over 10% since 2010, the largest percentage increase of any single area. My constituents in South Shields are proud, competent, hard-working and skilled, but they have been let down by this Government, who just do not understand or care about the issues that the north faces.

The Tories are not devolving real power to our communities with the northern powerhouse initiative; they are delegating cuts. The Chancellor once said that a true powerhouse requires true power, but we know and he knows that if we take away the money, we take away that power.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman). She made a passionate and eloquent speech in the Chamber during the previous debate on this subject, but I think she has excelled herself. I am grateful for the opportunity to have this debate today.

I was going to set out some of the context and background regarding the north-east but, due the fact that colleagues have done so far more eloquently than I, as well as the time limit, I will not. There are so many great things about the north-east, but I am fed up of having to stand up and wave bleeding stumps and plead about our poverty. People in the north-east have too much dignity and too much going for them for us to do that. The Government have put us in a situation where we have to explain things to them, but they do not understand the challenges we face.

Public services in the north-east should have faced far less substantial cuts than other areas of the country to enable us to tackle the disparities that colleagues have set out, but that is not what we have seen. Instead, the north-east has experienced disproportionately high cuts to local authority budgets. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) described, the impact is most keenly felt in non-statutory services such as youth services provision. Redcar and Cleveland has levels of drug and alcohol problems that are higher than the national average and it has double the rate of self-harm. We need preventive services for older people, support for those with disabilities and special educational needs, smoking cessation programmes, enterprise support teams and transport subsidies. All those services are vital in supporting people to live healthy, active lives or to get into work or education.

One of the great things in the region is the strength of our community and voluntary sector, which delves deep into the most deprived communities and gets to the parts that the state so often cannot reach. However, cuts to council budgets have meant that their grants have been slashed—so much for the big society. More vital services are being cut to the bone in the areas of greatest need.

It was clear from the debate on the financial settlement that the Government are not interested in any form of redistributive approach to local government finance that sees money go to where it is most needed. They are not interested in the principle that historically disadvantaged areas need support or at least a level playing field or the principle to which they paid lip service in 2010 that the broadest shoulders should bear the heaviest burden. They are quite content to have a settlement that has seen the 10 most deprived areas facing cuts 18 times higher than the 10 least deprived. They are quite content to be totally shameless by acknowledging that transition money was basically a bung to Tory areas where MPs were threatening revolt—we heard that from the Government’s own MPs during the debate.

Some Government MPs were not quite so honest and tried to claim that some kind of formula lay behind the unfair and unequal distribution of funding, and some that it was because their areas had an ageing or rural population. Let me tell the House about age in the north-east: 17.1% of the north-east’s population is over 65 years old, compared with 16% in the rest of England, so we have a higher proportion of ageing people. The north-east is also well above the national average of people accessing social care: 29% more people access home care services, 41% more access day care and 100% more access short-term residential care. This is heartless, shameless, pork barrel politics, which does a disservice to the Government and this place.
Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) on her brilliant, passionate and humane speech, which illustrated what the cuts decided by the Government mean to the people of her beautiful town, the rest of the north-east and, indeed, the rest of the country.

What is clear from the debate is that the Government have betrayed the north-east. The people of the north-east are decent folk. They are looking simply for fairness, not for favours, but the Government’s approach has been desperately unfair. The north-east has suffered some of the highest cuts in the country, but those communities were offered next to nothing from the transitional relief fund, which the Government made available a few weeks ago.

Here is what happened. A number of Tory MPs representing far wealthier areas than the north-east suddenly realised that their communities would start to feel the same pain that other parts of the country had been suffering for the last five years. People such as the Prime Minister’s mum got up and complained about what the Tory Government were doing, because they saw their services were at risk.

It is worth digging into the term “services”, because what it means is people’s quality of life. It means services such as Sure Start children’s centres, libraries, street cleaning, keeping the street lights on, filling in potholes, fixing pavements, giving young people things to do that keep them from getting into trouble, providing care for older and disabled people, and providing bus services to rural areas whose populations would otherwise be stuck where they live and unable to get out to enjoy their lives or to go to work. That is what services are—real things in real lives.

When some Tory MPs representing wealthier areas realised what was coming their way, the Government decided to buy them off. The Government set up a £300 million fund, but they did not give that money to the areas that had suffered the biggest cuts; they sent it to the areas that had suffered the fewest cuts. The only way the Government can justify their false claim to have helped the hardest hit with that money is to pretend that every single cut that happened before 2015 did not happen—but it did, and people throughout the country know that it did. Eighty-five per cent of the money went to areas run by the Conservatives; barely 5% went to areas run by the Labour party, despite the fact that the Labour areas have far higher levels of deprivation and have suffered far higher levels of cuts over the past five years.

My area of Croydon is, I grant, some way from the north-east. It has had 17 times more cuts than Surrey, but Croydon lost a further £44 million with barely any relief funding. I thought that was appalling, but the north-east has suffered even more. Durham, which had 27 times more cuts than Surrey, got nothing; Sunderland had 36 times more cuts and got nothing; South Tyneside had 37 times more cuts and got nothing; Newcastle had 41 times more cuts and got nothing; and Hartlepool had a swingeing 42 times more cuts than Surrey and got nothing at all. The whole of the north-east got next to nothing out of the settlement—nothing but cuts, cuts and more cuts.

Only weeks before important council elections, the Tories gerrymandered millions of pounds to wealthy areas such as Surrey to buy off dissent from their Back-Bench MPs. I use “gerrymander” advisedly: for the avoidance of doubt, I mean the misuse of public funds to advantage the Tory party. It is as simple as that, and it is a disgrace to our democracy.

I will touch briefly on social care. The Government approach to underfunding social care is to underfund the services and then to localise the blame for the cuts that will inevitably follow for some of the most vulnerable people in our community. Here is how the Government do it: they underfund social care, they hand over responsibility for it to councils, and they tell them to put up council tax by 2% a year, partially to plug the funding gap. That still leaves a £1 billion funding black hole for those services. Earlier, we heard about the case of Newcastle: a 2% council tax rise raises £1.4 million, but the shortfall in funding for these services is £14 million. The Government hope that councils will get the blame for the cuts and council tax hikes that were designed in Downing Street.

Finally, I want to look at council tax rises, because the 2% Osborne tax is not the only thing that will happen. The figures that the Government sent out to councils last month in spreadsheets from the Treasury included the assumption that there would be not only a 2% rise for social care, but a further council tax rise of 1.75% on average every year for the next five years. By 2020 that adds up to a 20% council tax hike. That is the Government’s assumption and what they are planning.

The truth is that we get the worst of all worlds with the Tories: we get cuts in services that people rely on and we get hikes in council tax that hurt the low-paid the most. The Government are damaging every community in the country, but the north-east is among the hardest hit—£24 million of extra funding for Surrey; next to nothing for the north-east of England. Whatever happened to the one nation Tories? The Tories have been too ashamed to show their face in the debate this afternoon, and they should be too ashamed to show their faces anywhere in the north-east.

My area of Croydon is, I grant, some way from the north-east. It has had 17 times more cuts than Surrey, but Croydon lost a further £44 million with barely any relief funding. I thought that was appalling, but the north-east has suffered even more. Durham, which had 27 times more cuts than Surrey, got nothing; Sunderland had 36 times more cuts and got nothing; South Tyneside had 37 times more cuts and got nothing; Newcastle had 41 times more cuts and got nothing; and Hartlepool had a swingeing 42 times more cuts than Surrey and got nothing at all. The whole of the north-east got next to nothing out of the settlement—nothing but cuts, cuts and more cuts.
Local authorities account for a quarter of all public spending, so it has always been clear that they would have to play their part in reducing what was the largest deficit in post-war history. Last autumn, the Government’s spending review set out clearly how savings must be made over this Parliament to ensure that we finish the job of eliminating the remaining deficit and what that will mean in terms of overall council funding. In real terms, councils will be required to save 6.7% over the spending review period. At the 2010 spending review, a reduction of 14% was announced, so the pace of spending reductions has slowed significantly for this Parliament, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has acknowledged.

In cash terms, when we look at the overall core resources available to local government in the finance settlement, core spending power is virtually unchanged over the spending review period. Councils will receive £44.5 billion in 2015-16 and £44.3 billion in 2019-20. Furthermore, we have tried to be as fair in regard to distribution as possible, making reasonable assumptions that understate the maximum resources available to councils. For example, in line with the Office for Budget Responsibility, we assume that council tax will increase with inflation, not by the referendum threshold of 2%. If we had assumed the maximum figure, more than a quarter of a billion pounds extra in resources would have been available. We have been clear: yes, further savings are required, and councils have recognised that, but we have taken important steps to help councils make those savings.

Mr Kevan Jones: I do not know what colour the sky is in the Minister’s world. What is fair about north-east councils—Durham, Newcastle and others in the figures I read out—having 4% cuts in their budgets this year when Surrey has less than a 1% cut and Wokingham’s cut is even less than that? How can that be fair, given the demands on services faced by Durham compared with places such as Surrey? Is it just a coincidence that 85% of the councils who gain from his transitional arrangements happen to have Tory MPs?

Mr Marcus Jones: The average spending power per dwelling for the 10% most deprived authorities is about 23% more than for the 10% least deprived authorities in this coming year. Opposition Members have mentioned several times an assertion about the transitional grant. The grant was based firmly on the local government finance settlement, the consultation we undertook and the responses from the consultation. There were a significant number of responses and a call for some sort of transitional grant to support those areas that had lost the most central Government grant compared with the amount expected based on the old redistribution formula.

Anna Turley: The Minister has been generous with his time, but what does he say to his own MPs who stood up in the Chamber and admitted that they got the money because they threatened to revolt?

Mr Marcus Jones: There are MPs from my party who represent very wealthy areas, and others who represent less well-off areas. I say to the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) that not all of our Members are from Surrey: my party would not have been able to win from the revenue support grant.

Ian Mearns: Does the Minister accept that even though the revenue support grant is due to be withdrawn completely, in the meantime the Government have written out any concept of addressing need? Local authorities such as mine in the north-east of England do not have the capacity to raise taxes locally because many of the properties in our area are in the lower bands, so the band D national median is meaningless.

Mr Marcus Jones: That is why generally, as I said, the areas that have been referred to in the debate that are receiving transitional grant had a higher reduction in revenue support grant than areas such as that represented by the hon. Gentleman. He and a number of his colleagues have taken a dim view of the north-east in relation to its ability to move forward as an economy and create business rate revenue and additional council tax.

To take the constituency of the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), for example, thanks to the business rate retention scheme during 2014-15 there was a 14.6% increase in revenue. To pick up on a point he made, we will move to full business rate retention in 2020, but before that there will be a consultation on how we draft with redistribution. We understand and accept that in some places significantly more business rates are collected than in others. The approach we have taken in this historic settlement is aimed at supporting those areas with the greatest pressures and providing councils with the certainty they need as we move towards a system of greater devolution. The settlement allocates funding on the basis of the core resources available to local authorities, taking into account councils’ business rates and council tax as well as their revenue support grant. It ensures that councils that deliver the same set of services will receive the same changes in core funding for those services.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Marcus Jones: I will in a moment. That is fair and that fact was recognised by Middlesbrough Council in its response to the consultation on the settlement.

We have also provided councils with unprecedented levels of certainty. Our historic offer of a four-year settlement answers calls from councils to allow them to plan over the long term, giving them the certainty required to create greater efficiencies. That has been welcomed by councils across the country, including those in the north-east such as Durham County Council and Newcastle City Council.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Marcus Jones: I have already given way; I am going to make some progress.

Councils now have the opportunity to smooth their path over four years, using reserves where necessary and if they so wish. Even so, we have not made any assumptions that councils will use reserves in any published figures.
Despite giving this opportunity, we have made no assumptions that councils will use their reserves in any published figures.

The settlement also responds to the clear call from all tiers of local Government and from many of my colleagues in the House to recognise the priority and increasing cost of caring for our elderly population. As such, we have made up to £3.5 billion available by 2019-20 for adult social care through a dedicated social care precept of up to 2% a year and the improved better care fund. That is significantly more than the amount asked for by the Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services. We have proposed that the additional better care fund money should be distributed to complement the new council tax flexibility, so more will go councils that can raise the least from that flexibility. We will, however, consult colleagues in local government on that in due course.

We have also prioritised housing. The new homes bonus was due to come to an end, but it has been a useful contributor to the increase in planning permissions being granted. Payments since its introduction in 2011 total just under £3.4 billion, reflecting more than 700,000 new homes and conversions and more than 100,000 empty properties brought back into use.

Jenny Chapman: On a point of order, Sir David. Is it not convention in Westminster Hall to allow time for the person who secured the debate to reply? I believe it is.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): I was rather hoping that there might be at least 30 seconds for the hon. Lady to reply.

Mr Marcus Jones: I will certainly do that for the hon. Lady; I intended no discourtesy. Finally, in 2016-17 the core spending power per dwelling in the north-east region is £1,820, which is 3.9% higher than the £1,750 figure for the south-east.

3.59 pm

Jenny Chapman: When you said 30 seconds, Sir David, I did not think you meant that literally.

That was an obtuse, lacklustre, disembodied reply from a Minister who showed no interest in the concerns we raised. We need to ask the National Audit Office to take a look at this, because the political manoeuvring that has led us to where we are would frankly make even a Liberal Democrat blush. When that is combined with the cuts to fire, police, health and education that our region is experiencing, it is disgraceful.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
I took the opportunity during the consultation period to speak with lawyers from Lambeth and Southwark who represent residents at Lambeth county court about their concerns about the proposed closure. I am grateful to them for the time they took to do that and to the Minister for meeting me during the consultation to discuss those concerns.

The Minister has listened to some of the concerns raised during the consultation, and as a consequence, the proposed closure of Lambeth county court has changed somewhat, such that housing possession hearings will now move not to Putney but to Camberwell magistrates court. I have brought this matter to the House for debate today because that decision will not now be subject to further consultation; because there are important questions about the decision that need to be answered; and because, ultimately, I am not confident that the revised proposal will address all of the concerns raised about the closure of Lambeth county court.

The first area of concern is the impact of the closure on access to justice and the cost of justice for people who will now have to attend court in Putney rather than Kennington. Many people attending court will now be faced with a significantly longer journey, as my hon. Friends have said, and particularly those on low incomes who cannot afford to travel by train or tube. From parts of Lambeth and Southwark, residents will face a round trip of up to four hours on four different buses each way to get to Putney. That is worse than the impact on travel time of some of the court closures proposed in rural areas.

I know how difficult many of my constituents find it simply to get to other parts of Lambeth and Southwark to access services such as the citizens advice bureau. Indeed, I helped to arrange a CAB outreach service on one of my estates because it was so difficult for residents there to travel to other parts of the borough. My worry with a much longer, more complex journey to court is that many residents simply will not make it at all. The attrition in attendance experienced at family courts following a previous closure programme and the subsequent inefficiencies that has been clearly documented and was raised with me only this morning by the borough commander in Lambeth. The consequence is that a theoretical cash saving on paper is translated in reality into either cases being delayed, causing additional expense to the public purse, or residents not having the opportunity to give evidence at their own hearing, therefore denying them access to justice.

The second area of concern is the loss of specialist housing law as legal aid has been cut, earning very modest pay, in order that they can represent the most vulnerable residents and ensure that their cases are dealt with quickly and effectively, given the application of expertise built up over many years. The loss of that specialist at a time when the housing crisis is growing in London, the number of evictions in the private rented sector is growing and the Government are reducing the security of tenure of residents in social housing would, in my view, be a terrible shame.

A third area of concern is the potential impact of the closure on the duty solicitor scheme in Lambeth. The current duty solicitor service is staffed by dedicated legal aid lawyers who have chosen to stay in that area of law as legal aid has been cut, earning very modest pay, in order that they can represent the most vulnerable residents and ensure that their cases are dealt with quickly and effectively, given the application of expertise built up over many years. The lawyers I have spoken to who work within that scheme tell me that the margins are so extremely narrow that the significant additional travel time associated with a move to Putney could easily mean the collapse of the current scheme because it will no longer be viable. I am extremely concerned about what that will mean for residents who have been able to rely on representation from trusted local law centres and legal aid firms for many years and, again, the impact on access to justice.

The consultation document and the Government’s response to the consultation is, however, exceptionally light on detail in that respect. There is no indication of how much of the saving the Government will make from the sale of closed courts and tribunals will be reinvested in new technology. There is no articulation of the services that people should expect to see in their local court. There is no modelling of the anticipated impact of investment in new technology on the Courts and Tribunals Service, and there is no immediate action plan for urgent investment to ensure that technology is in place wherever possible to immediately mitigate the impacts of the closures. Without a detailed plan of action, the statements made about the use of technology are simply warm words.

I turn now to some of my questions about the proposal to move housing possession hearings to Camberwell magistrates court rather than to Putney, which was made in response to the representations made during the consultation process. Although I very much welcome the fact that the Minister has listened and responded to the concerns that have been raised, very little detail has been set out about how exactly the proposal will work. I recently met a number of lawyers from Lambeth Law Centre who confirmed my view that the devil will be in the detail on this proposal, so I ask the Minister today whether he can provide some of that detail.

Camberwell magistrates court is already very busy. It is on a constrained site, and it is not clear how Camberwell will physically be able to accommodate additional housing possession hearings on top of the current volume of cases that are heard there.
Neil Coyle: I think the words I was looking for before were “It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship,” Mr Gray—I got that wrong earlier.

My hon. Friend is talking about the assessment that was made of Camberwell. In her discussions with the legal professionals in Southwark and Lambeth, did they also express concern that the assessment of Lambeth’s use was inaccurate? It was undertaken at a time when at least one judge was away and it did not take into account all the rooms that are used in preparation for court hearings.

Helen Hayes: Concerns have absolutely been raised that the figures used to underpin the consultation relating to usage levels at Lambeth county court were not, in fact, accurate at all.

On the move to Camberwell, it is not clear whether the administrative functions of Lambeth county court in relation to housing possession cases will now be based at Camberwell magistrates court, or whether they will move to Putney and only possession hearings will take place at Camberwell. If the administrative functions move to Putney, there is concern that some vulnerable residents facing eviction will still have to travel to Putney to initiate administrative processes that require attendance in person, such as applying for a stay of eviction. If the administrative functions move to Camberwell, it is imperative that Camberwell does not become overloaded.

We know what overloaded courts look like: everyone I have met who has had any experience of the Central London county court since it moved to the royal courts of justice describes it as being like the Chancery Court in Dickens’ novel, “Bleak House”, such are the delays in respect of housing and the other work that takes place there. Although there may be theoretical short-term savings to be achieved from its closure, there are very great risks that, as a consequence, justice will become less efficient and less easy to access, particularly for vulnerable residents on low incomes. The consequence of that will only be additional costs to the public sector in the long term.

I would be grateful for the Minister’s response to the concerns that I and my hon. Friends have raised. Fundamentally, I believe that this closure will have disastrous consequences for my constituents, and I urge him to reconsider it.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): May I say what a pleasure it is, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray? I commend the hon. Member for Dulwich county court, I will mention some general points. The consultation that we have just concluded ran last year and had more than 2,100 responses, all of which were carefully reviewed and analysed. I care about reforming our courts—about moving from places that have changed little since Victorian times to a modern, responsive and flexible system fit for the 21st century.

Neil Coyle: I echo the Minister’s kind words about my colleagues. I am sure that many of those respondents contacted the Minister and the Department to demonstrate their commitment to justice and modernising justice, but how many of the 2,100 responses agreed that it was sensible to close the court?

Mr Vara: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a precise number regarding the 2,100 responses that we received, but it is fair to say that a number of them objected to closures. As I said, we carefully looked at all the responses that were given. If he gives me some time, I will say that we did actually listen to many of the points that were made—if he bears with me, I will come to that.

Despite the best efforts of our staff and the judiciary, the infrastructure that supports the administration of the courts and tribunals is inefficient and disjointed. It uses technology that is now decades old. We offer very few services online and rely on paper forms. We key in data and pass bundles of documents between agencies. When we need to take payment, we can often only accept cash or cheques. We convene physical hearings to discuss matters of process. We need to end the old-fashioned ways of working that create inefficiencies and which make it hard for the public to access justice.

That is why the Government have a significant reform programme in which there will be an investment of some £700 million over the next four years. That will transform the experience of everyone who comes into contact with the courts and tribunals. New services and new, more joined-up ways of working across the justice system will require a modern infrastructure to support them. The reforms will increase access to justice by making it swifter, easier and more efficient.

To achieve those benefits, however, we must make difficult decisions, and deciding to close a court is undoubtedly one of the most difficult. I want to emphasise that we have listened to the responses to the consultation. We have retained four courts and in one further case, we
have retained one of the jurisdictions along with the building following the responses that we received. In 22 courts, we have modified the proposal in some way to reduce the impact of the closure on court users—indeed, Lambeth is one of those courts, and I will refer to specific points on that shortly.

In the case of Lambeth county court, the court is poorly used; it is only used for around 40% of its available sitting time. The building is in need of considerable maintenance, including the replacement of air conditioning, lighting and aspects of the heating and hot water system. In many respects, it is simply not fit for purpose as a modern and flexible court building.

As the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood mentioned in her speech, she and I had a meeting. I thought it was very productive—following which we were able to engage in conversation with my officials and she was able to liaise with the local council, Southwark council, and there was a very productive dialogue. Unfortunately, after Southwark council had carried out a feasibility study, it came to the conclusion that county court work could not be transferred to its premises, which we were open to considering. I am, however, pleased that following the representations that she and others made, and recognising the enormous number of housing possession cases that are at Lambeth county court, we have managed to shift the work two miles down the road to Camberwell Green magistrates court. I think that is not unreasonable, in that we have listened, and I would like to think that two miles is not a huge distance.

I understand that the closure of a court has a very real impact on the court’s users, staff and judiciary, but I want to make it clear that in England and Wales, the closure of 86 courts will only reduce the proportion of citizens who will be able to reach their nearest civil or family court within an hour by car by 1% and by public transport by 8%. It is also worth pointing out that the majority of the population will never have to attend a court, and for those who do, it is likely to be a rare occurrence.

The issue of access to justice featured prominently in the hon. Lady’s speech. Being able to access courts and tribunals when required is, of course, essential, but effective access to justice is not defined simply by the proximity to a court or tribunal building. It should be defined by how easy it is for court users to access the service they need, however they choose to do that. We want to take advantage of the choice and flexibility that digital technology offers. We will move towards a system in which face-to-face hearings are required only for sensitive and complex cases. Online plea, claims and evidence systems with much wider adoption of video conferencing into court will reduce the need for people to travel to court.

Helen Hayes: It is not clear to me what the timescale is for the investment of £700 million in new technology, or whether there will be a time lag following the closure of Lambeth county court. The move to Wandsworth and the introduction of the advantages that new technology may be able to bring. Will the Minister set out the timescale and process is a little more detail?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady raises a good point. She will appreciate that I cannot, off the cuff, give her the timetable for Lambeth court, but I can say that it is clearly very important that there is synchronisation between the closure, the transfer of work and the new digital process coming in. Otherwise, there will be an extraordinarily chaotic justice system, which is the last thing any of us want. I assure her that we will be working at pace to ensure the modernisation will work alongside any closures and transfers. She was right to raise the point and I hope I have given her some comfort.

It cannot be right that people are able to transact important aspects of their lives online—for example, completing their tax returns or doing bank transactions—but when interacting with the court having to revert to paper forms and photocopying evidence. I am keenly aware that many people who encounter our justice system do so when they are at their most vulnerable. They may be a victim or witness in a criminal case, or individuals, businesses and families trying to resolve disputes. They may have been recently bereaved or experienced family problems. Whatever the circumstances we need to make better use of technology to provide them with easier access to a more responsive system. This will benefit vulnerable users, with swifter processes and more proportionate services in many cases, which will reduce the need for potentially stressful attendances at court.

Indeed, we have a duty to offer more convenient, less intimidating ways for citizens to interact with the justice system while maintaining the authority of the court for serious cases.

Mr Umunna: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I am mindful that the hon. Member for Streatham spoke about security and if he wanted to intervene on that, I propose to deal with it now. He raised an important point. At present, we have a system whereby witnesses, victims and defendants can all end up on the same public transport going to the same court. Under the new and reformed court system that we envisage, we hope that evidence can be given from a video conferencing suite, perhaps in a civic building or a local police station. That would be done at an appointed time so the victim and the witness would turn up at a given time. It is likely that that suite would be much closer than the court that is dealing with the case. That must be a better and safer system.

Travel time is mentioned regularly, but given that we are moving to a system with video links, travel times will not be longer and in many cases may be shorter because people will be going to a civic centre or police station to give their evidence. That will reduce cost and time, and will be a lot more convenient.

Mr Umunna: One problem—there are several—is that the Minister cannot give my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) a timeframe for the introduction of the technologies. In his answer just now he used words such as “likely” and “may” do this or that. The problem is that the absence of the technology will create all sorts of problems for our constituents.
My second point is about the data that were collected and formed the background to the consultation. Clearly, they were collected when one of the judges was absent so were not reflective of just how busy Lambeth county court is.

**Mr Vara:** On the data, I assure hon. Members that the decision was based on the correct information. I hope the hon. Gentleman appreciates that, with the best will in the world, consultation on 91 courts requires human beings to put a huge amount of data into documentation. I assure him that the decision was taken on the correct information.

On my use of the words “may” and “will”, the hon. Gentleman should look at our track record. During the consultation, I met the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood. Following our meeting, there was instant dialogue between my officials and Southwark council. While the consultation was still proceeding, the council came to the conclusion that it was unable to accommodate what we wanted.

It would be unreasonable for the hon. Gentleman to expect me to give a specific time, date or month. All I can say is that when we are putting in place a £700 million-plus programme of court reform throughout England and Wales, he must take it on trust that we will do our damnedest to make sure everything fits in and is timely and orderly because, if it is not, there will be one massive chaotic justice system, which is the last thing I want.

**Neil Coyle:** I note the absence of a specific timeframe, which is unfortunate. Perhaps the Minister will write to my hon. Friends about that. Where is the assessment of the new costs to the police and councils of providing space for the video conferencing that the Minister mentioned?

On journey times, can the Minister tell us what percentage of cases he expects members of the public will still have to attend? In my constituency, there is a growing number of controlled parking zones. Thousands of people are not allowed to own a car where they live so a massive number of people will still be expected to use public transport and, as I have said, a round trip from Rotherhithe in the rush hour will take around four hours.

**Mr Vara:** I am mindful that I have about two and a half minutes and I am keen for the hon. Lady to have a few minutes to sum up.

In response to the hon. Gentleman, 20 years ago it was unthinkable that people would be accessing banking services from the comfort of their kitchen table or their sitting room. They did not know they would be able to access the Inland Revenue and file their tax return from the comfort of their home. It is important to recognise that proximity to justice does not mean being in a physical building called a court. We already have online transactions taking place. We will do our best to ensure that the £700 million-plus programme works apace and that we deliver the service that we want for a 21st-century justice system that is fit for purpose.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for securing this debate and I hope I have given her some comfort. I conclude by saying that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform our court system and that is precisely what we seek to do.

**Helen Hayes:** I thank the Minister for his response and for taking the time to respond in detail. On video links, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) suggested, there is serious concern about the context in which police stations are closing. I met one of my borough commanders this morning who said Brixton police station is full and there is no capacity. I am not sure the Government have a plan for that. Southwark and Camberwell councils are rationalising a number of their premises, which is probably why they have difficulties in accommodating the Court Service. It is not clear that facilities for video links will be available.

**Mr Vara:** We have a video link in Wales that operates from a community centre. We can be broad in our thinking process.

**Helen Hayes:** My point is about the absence of a detailed plan in the context of a very big decision. The Minister has not responded to my detailed questions about the way in which provision will work at Camberwell and I would be grateful for a written response.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change the justice system. At the moment, it is a once-in-a-generation opportunity without a plan.

**Mr James Gray (in the Chair):** The hon. Lady may want a lifetime opportunity, but I am afraid she has run out of time.

*Question put and agreed to.*
Road Routes to the South-West

4.30 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the upgrading of road routes into the South West.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am very grateful that this Transport Minister is here today. Looking round the Chamber, I can say with confidence that many hon. Members will agree with me when I say that I do not believe that the south-west has had the greatest bite of the cherry and the greatest funding in relation to roads and infrastructure. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister has travelled through the west country and shares our concerns. All I hope is that he has his chequebook with him this afternoon—we will see the colour of his money later, we hope.

The whole idea of this debate is to ensure that we deal with the roads going through the west country. There are particular roads that hon. Members will want to promote. I will be considering in particular the A303 from Ilminster through to Honiton. I very much welcome what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government have put forward for dualling the A303 right the way past Stonehenge—indeed, under Stonehenge—and right the way through to Ilminster, and then dualling the A358 from Ilminster to the M5. My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) is not here, but she would want me to say how much she welcomes what is happening with the A358. I am not here to complain about any of the roads that the Government have in place; I am here to say that we need a second arterial route into the west country. Just as we need a second railway line, we need a second road. Taking all the traffic on to the M5 at Taunton may not be the best idea if we have a problem on the M5, so having a second arterial route to Exeter, to the airport, is essential.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): My hon. Friend makes the valid point that we need railways—we need two lines—and we certainly need a very strong route through. Does he agree that the Government should be in favour of that? We need economic growth in the south-west, and without that infrastructure we will not achieve it.

Neil Parish: I could not agree more. Doing the figures, we reckon that these infrastructure improvements could deliver about £40 billion to the west country, so we are talking about very big money. There are also a great number of visitors coming to see us, and we want to ensure that they can get there by rail, by road and even on their bicycles if they want to. We want them to come to the west country. There are many hon. Members present from Cornwall. To get to Cornwall, people need to travel through Devon, Somerset and Wiltshire, so that is key.

The west country is definitely a honeypot as far as tourism is concerned. If the A303/A30 through to Honiton and Exeter is dualled virtually all the way, most of the London traffic will come that way. Then there is the north and the northern powerhouse that the Chancellor is so keen to have and that I very much support. When people from the northern powerhouse and the midlands come down, they will naturally come down the M5 and into the west country from that direction. What I am talking about is a natural way of keeping that traffic going and keeping it separated. I go back to the point I made earlier. Let us say that we take all the traffic on to the M5 and there is a problem after Wellington. A caravan may tip over going down the hill, which is not an unforeseen happening. With what I am talking about, we will not only be able to get traffic on to the motorway. If there is a blockage on the motorway, then with the A358 dualled, we will get a lot more traffic back up the A358, going into Honiton. That is where I believe we need to do the second route in and have it dualled all the way through and upgraded through the Blackdown hills.

I know that my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) will make a case for upgrading the north Devon link road, and I very much support that. I am not here to destroy other people's ambitions; we want to ensure that we have as much investment for the west country as we possibly can.

I agree with the Chancellor—the architect of our long-term economic plan. As he rightly says, the south-west has not enjoyed as much attention as the north of England, but that does not excuse any neglect of the south-west. I agree that his long-term economic plan for the south-west is good, but we want to see the colour of his money. In particular, I believe that transforming connections between the south-west and the rest of the country is the right thing to do, as well as improving connections within the south-west. From Somerset to Devon to Dorset, these infrastructure upgrades are essential.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am very much enjoying my hon. Friend's comments. Does he agree that the Kingskerswell bypass, which has just opened and connects my constituency to the rest of the road network by dual carriageway for the first time, is a perfect example of the benefits that can be delivered by investment in our infrastructure, with thousands of jobs and new homes predicted to be generated just by that investment?

Neil Parish: I could not agree more. The Kingskerswell bypass brings people into Torbay. It brings them from the A380, and if they go back on that road, they have the A380, the A38 and the A30 when they get to Exeter, so they have a choice of roads. It is ideal to keep the A303 going from Ilminster through to Honiton to ensure that they can make that connection, so I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. He mentioned Dorset, and Dorset in the south-west often feels unfairly left out. Does he agree that it is not just about individual counties such as Dorset and Wiltshire working together? We have to look across the whole of the south-west and then, as he says, into individual counties. For example, it is vital that we get north-south roads built out of the important port of Poole and put that infrastructure in place.

Neil Parish: I again agree, because in a previous life I had the terrible job of being one of the Members of the European Parliament for the whole of the south-west,
which includes Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and Dorset, as well as all the other counties in the west country. If we take the A350 and other roads, getting north to south through Dorset, from Poole to Bristol, is an absolute nightmare. It is about ensuring that we have roads from those ports through to our major cities and our major road links, so I am very supportive of what my hon. Friend says.

In the course of this Parliament, we have a real opportunity in the south-west to consolidate and invest in our infrastructure. A number of roads need upgrading, and I know that my hon. Friends here today will be talking about the various projects—we have heard some comments already, but there will be more—all of which will play an important part in upgrading and improving our local economy in the south-west and our long-term economic plan. I think at least one of those investments should be upgrading the A303/A30/A358. The A303/A30 is a vital arterial route into the west from London, as I have mentioned. Those upgrades will also help as traffic calming measures. Currently, the A303/A30/A358 is one of the most congested roads in the south-west, and in the summer months road usage increases by up to 50%. If the Minister ran down the A30 today, he would probably find little problem with it, but that bears no resemblance at all to what it is like in the height of summer. Do not forget that we want people to come to the west country to spend their money and enjoy the great scenery.

The A358 runs through the constituency of my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane, and acts as a link between the A303, the A30 and the M5. She has campaigned long and hard for the upgrade of the A358, which runs just outside the Blackdown hills area of outstanding natural beauty—an area that I share with her. About 80% of local residents and businesses in the Blackdown hills AONB believe that road congestion is an issue and 97% of all residents support road improvements in the hills. The Blackdown hills AONB has made it clear that it supports an upgrade to the A303/A30, but that those upgrades should be carried out with sensitivity and in ways that are compatible with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Blackdown hills.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need clarity about the timetable from the Minister, so that all our constituents across the south-west can be confident that the Government’s commitment will be delivered during the next few years before the next election?

Neil Parish: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. We have talked about this for a great deal of time and we have put the money on the table, but people actually want the road built now.

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): It is not just about the commitment to doing it; it is about physically seeing some of the work starting. We need some spades in the ground.

Neil Parish: We certainly do. Before I answer my hon. Friend, I want to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) that it is essential to get the tunnel built, but I want to ensure that we start building all parts of the A303/A30. We should not just hold up one part for another. We have to get on with it. To get down to Plymouth, we have to get through a number of counties. Plymouth is very much a driving force for the west country so it is essential that we get not only trains, but good roads to Plymouth.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. On the subject of getting the choreography right, it is great to do Stonehenge, which is what grabs the national news. However, would my hon. Friend observe that if we fix Stonehenge and merely shunt traffic a little bit further west, into the village of Chicklade, for example—a very real possibility, particularly if the economy takes a nose dive, which economies tend to do from time to time—my constituents will find a whopping great traffic jam landed on their doorstep, which would be an extremely bad thing and do nothing to sort out the problem with the superhighway to the south-west?

Neil Parish: I agree with my hon. Friend. Roads are a little bit like tributaries. If one area is cleared, the water is taken faster into the next area, and the same applies with traffic. Therefore, if we are doing the road, we have to ensure that we dual the road all the way through.

Although the tunnel under Stonehenge is necessary, it is expensive and will take some time. We have other schemes through Chicklade and other places that are not so expensive and can go on at the same time. The previous Government made a mistake: the problem at Stonehenge stopped any help to the rest of the roads. We have to do Stonehenge but we have to do the other parts of the road as well. Should the Minister travel on the A303/A30 today, he will have the good fortune of congested roads so that he can safely admire the natural beauty of the area, but I want him to be able to travel through a little faster so that he can get to his destination when he decides he is going to and is not stuck in hours of traffic jams in the summer.

In the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, we deal with air quality. There is no doubt that the more traffic is congested, the more vehicles stay ticking over, and as idling cars give out a lot of pollution, this a problem of pollution as well. If we get people through quicker, Roads Minister, we will improve the environment even more.

Unfortunately, many commuters are not that interested in the surrounding beauty and think that getting to work on time is important. Although a great many tourists come through the area in the summer, we must not forget that a lot of people are still working. They want to get to work and to get goods delivered in their vans and cars.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head of a historical problem, which is that the south-west—I include Dorset in that—has always been seen as a busy holiday destination that can just take the pressure for those months. It is often forgotten that we have a vital and viable series of businesses large and small, the agricultural sector and so on, which need high-quality roads so they can get their goods to and from market and their employees can get to and from work. If we are to see a real strengthening of our south-west economy, roads such as the A350 and the C13 in my constituency all need investment and attention.
Neil Parish: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. When we improve the major roads, we must ensure that all the links work and get the heavy traffic through. We must ensure that there are good roads for tourists and for those who live in the west country all the time.

Some 58% of people think that road safety is an issue and 53% believe that reliability is an issue, which demonstrates the need for an upgrade due to the public perception of the lack of reliability of the road. That goes back to what I said at the beginning: if people choose a route into the west country and they are absolutely certain they can get along the A303, they will use it; if not, they will go on to the motorway, which will probably be highly congested.

This is not just about public perception. The A303, A30 and A358 have among the highest number of fatalities and personal injury accidents, which underlines that road safety is a clear issue. Of course, road safety is not just an issue along the A303, A30 and A358. I have been working hard with Highways England to come up with a solution for Hunters Lodge junction on the A35, because that route is a real problem. There have been serious accidents and fatalities there next to the turning into Uplyme and Lyme Regis.

Anne Marie Morris: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a safety issue regarding the number of potholes? I remember that in a recent very bad winter, the potholes, even on the M5, were very significant. Given the number of roads we have in the west country—certainly in Devon—we need more money not just for new roads, but for ensuring that the existing roads are properly maintained.

Neil Parish: In fairness, I think that the Government gave a great deal of money for potholes, and the county councils, particularly Devon County Council, worked very hard on the problem. We have to deal with potholes because they cause accidents and damage cars. It is essential that we get that work done but, in fairness to the Government, they did give something like £8 million to Devon to solve the problem of potholes.

I am dealing with Highways England regarding the A35. We are looking for a solution to slow the traffic and make the Hunters Lodge junction safer—we must deal with that. Upgrading the whole corridor of the A303, A30 and A358 would create 21,400 jobs and boost the local economy by some £41.06 billion—a key delivery for the long-term economic plan for the south-west. Other benefits would include £1.9 billion of transport benefits due to reduced journey times and greater resilience.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned the long-term economic plan for the south-west, with which the Minister will be familiar. It was delivered 13 months ago, almost to the day, and he very clearly pledged £7.2 billion for wider transport improvements in the south-west, £3 billion of which was for roads. I hope my hon. Friend would agree that today would be a good time to hear an update on how the spending of that £3 billion is going.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend raises a good point. We are keen to hear from the Minister exactly how the spending is going and when we are likely to see diggers arriving to construct the roads, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) said earlier. We look forward to that answer.

Additionally, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire) reminded me, the A30 is a stretch of road that runs past Exeter airport and that by no means constitutes low noise. He is particularly keen for the concrete motorway to be quietened—I suspect he tried that when the Minister came down the A30. It is definitely dualled, of which I am jealous, but there is an argument about the noise caused by the road. The village of Clyst in the East Devon constituency is hit by the double whammy of noise from the airport and from the roads.

Furthermore, the A30 is the main carriageway for motorists travelling westwards towards the Exeter and East Devon growth point, which is also in the East Devon constituency. The growth point, as my right hon. Friend pointed out to me, includes the brand-new and fast-growing town of Cranbrook, the science park, the business park, SkyPark and, as mentioned previously, Exeter airport. The Minister was in Cranbrook just last week for the opening of a new train station, and he will have seen at first hand that improvements to the A30 would be a big boost to the growth point and therefore the wider economic area. The only way to achieve those figures is to upgrade the whole A303/A30—I may possibly have mentioned that before. That second arterial route into the west country would create a natural flow of traffic, as much of the London traffic would be dealt with, thereby creating the sensible and logical division of traffic that we need.

I ask the Minister for assurances that all those projects will be given the go-ahead. Please show the same confidence in the south-west that all of us here today share and recognise. We have been given a brilliant opportunity to develop as part of the long-term economic plan not just for the west country but for the whole country. Will he encourage Highways England to work with Devon County Council on the design of the roads through Honiton and Monkton, all the way through the Blackdown hills to Ilminster? Devon County Council has done a lot of work on that. Finally, we say to the Chancellor: please may we have these funds? They have been promised, and we look forward to seeing them.

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I note that at least five hon. Members, perhaps more, are seeking to catch my eye. I intend to call the first Front Bench spokesperson at 10 minutes past 5, which gives 18 minutes between five speakers. An average of three or four minutes each would be courteous to each other.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is appropriate that a fellow south-west MP should be in the Chair for this important debate, Mr Gray.

Given the time available, I will move quickly to my shopping list for the Minister, but not without first saying that the unveiling of the long-term economic plan for the south-west last year was an important moment in the election campaign, because it clearly demonstrated that a Conservative Government would have the south-west at the heart of their thinking and would recognise that investment in south-west infrastructure
had for too long lagged behind other parts of the country. Since the election, we have had an opportunity to debate some of the problems with our broadband infrastructure, but the election was not the first time we had an opportunity to debate the issue of roads led by my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) on the area’s rail infrastructure. Today’s debate on roads is similarly important.

I will briefly focus on two areas, the first being our region’s strategic connections. The M5 is closed too often. Traffic gets south of Bristol and is too often met with a traffic jam that closes the road, which has an impact on the visitor economy not just in Somerset but in Devon and Cornwall. On a Friday evening, many restaurants and campsites are left without their Friday evening’s revenue because people are still stuck in and around Avonmouth on the M5. The A303 and the A358 are clearly important improvements for us to make to take some pressure off the M4-M5 interchange. Those improvements must be made as quickly as possible, but with them they must come a traffic management system that goes all the way back to the eastern end of the M4, so that people are advised to take the A303 and A358, if that route is the clearest, when trying to access the south-west. We must also make more effort to connect our road network with our rail and air transport hubs.

At the moment, too many of our railway stations and airports are too far removed from decent roads, which also stands in the way of economic development.

My one entirely parochial plea, having spoken about the importance of the A303 and the A358—that is doubt the most important improvement we must make to our region—is that, locally, there is a challenge in accessing the northern part of Somerset. There is an east-west connection on the M4 corridor. The next proper east-west trunk road is the A303 and the A358 in their current state; there is nothing in between, unless we accept the Bristol southern ring road, but that really serves Bristol’s suburbs, not the county of Somerset, nor Somerset or north-east Somerset.

Although my hon. Friend the Members for Bath (Ben Howlett) and for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) are both encouraging improved access off the M4 beyond Bath and down into west Wiltshire and Somerset, we are also looking at improvements from junction 23 of the M5 along the A39 and the A361 to open up eastern Somerset and west Wiltshire from the M5 corridor, to open, plant that in the Minister’s mind, as I will be coming to speak to him about it in due course. It would make a significant difference to access for that part of Somerset which, at the same time, runs the risk of becoming a rock in the stream as everything moves around it very quickly on the A303 or the M4/M5. That does no service to my constituency, where there are huge opportunities for a relatively small number of very short road improvements—probably an extra five miles of road. With that, I cede the floor so that others can put their shopping lists on the record, too.

4.56 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) for securing this important debate.

The A30 is the only real route of access to Penzance, which is the best-known town in the UK. It is still a hugely popular tourist destination, and it looks after the whole of west Cornwall. It is the economic centre of my constituency. Although I want to address the concerns about roads and congestion, I do not want to discourage people from booking their holiday in west Cornwall this summer, so please do that.

People who have holidayed in west Cornwall will know that at peak times throughout the year, not just in the summertime, the roads are particularly congested. Good work has been done on the A30 by this Government. We have not seen a lot of investment, but the road is being dualled right down to the edge of my constituency. At the moment, the road continues as a single carriageway right through the last and only village on the A30, Crowlas, where the first set of traffic lights for those travelling from London can be found.

In my constituency I genuinely have the biggest challenge and deserve the greatest rewards, for which I am thankful. We have a single carriageway, and Cornwall Council’s estimate suggests that congestion just on that section of road costs my constituency some £3.1 million a year, so we have a problem. There was a solution, but in 1997, the Labour Government cancelled a shovel-ready project that would have brought the road comfortably into Penzance and have resolved some of the issues that the present Government are now being forced to consider.

I want to see a solution, and I thank the Minister for coming down in August on a very wet day. It only rains one day in the summer, which is when people come on holiday, and it was that particular day. He stood on the edge of the road, and he met the local council and local campaigners. He could see for himself the challenge that we have before us to improve the situation.

As the cars move more freely after the work is done, it will only create a new pinch point in my constituency, making it even more urgent to address the situation. The Cornish expressway will keep traffic moving freely, reduce pollution and boost our economy. As I said, I have met a number of people and brought them around the table. We will do whatever it takes—whatever the Government or Highways England need us to do—to make the case. Our intention is that a well thought-out plan will be prepared and included in the road investment strategy 2, for which the Government are currently seeking ideas. I would welcome some indication that such a solution to the A30 in my neck of the woods, enabling it to meet current demand on that section of road, would be welcomed by the Minister. I want to be sure that he will support the hard work that we will put in to free up the economy, reduce pollution and keep traffic moving.

5 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Mr Gray, I can feel you champing at the bit to get involved in this debate; as another Member rightly said, you are a Wiltshire Member of Parliament too. I have three straightforward points to make.
First, the issue of transport connectivity in the south-west and down into the peninsula is absolutely and utterly vital. I have been campaigning on it for the last 15 years, both for 10 years as the candidate, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who was there in the early days, and in the past five years as the Member of Parliament for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport.

There are two vital issues. The first is the dualling of the A303. We must ensure, ideally, that it continues through the Blackdown hills as well, because it can take up to four hours, if not five or six, to get all the way from London down to Plymouth. The second is that in 2020, we will commemorate the Mayflower 400, the anniversary of when the Mayflower left Plymouth to found the American colonies. We have an opportunity to use that occasion to hold one of the best trade exhibitions in the country, not dissimilar to what happened during the Olympics. We need decent transport links—road, rail and air. I urge the Government seriously to consider reopening Plymouth airport; I know that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has said that he will do so. If we do not have those links, we will lose an opportunity beyond all measure.

Finally, although we talk about dualling the A303, the A358 and potentially the road down into the Blackdown hills, the M4-M5 interchange is a nightmare for those of us who come up to London on a Sunday evening or afternoon. Only too often, I find it difficult to work out in my mind’s eye which lane I should end up in, especially if England are playing cricket and I get somewhat taken away by what might be happening in the match. I get rather concerned. As often as not, I find myself going up to Gloucester on the M5, which is a big mistake. That also needs to be looked at and sorted out.

If we do not do something about the issue, we will pay the price. It is the south-west that has delivered the majority for this Government in the House of Commons. It is vital that we do not miss this chance to look after Somerset, Devon, Wiltshire, Dorset and Cornwall. If we do, we will lose an awful lot of opportunities, and will unfortunately leave the issue to the Opposition, who I do not believe are as committed to delivering for us in the west country.

5.3 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I congratulate my parliamentary neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this debate. I will take three minutes to bang on unashamedly about the North Devon link road. It is a pleasure to be part of this cohort of south-west Conservative MPs. We all speak with one voice—

Simon Hoare: Where’s Exeter?

Peter Heaton-Jones: As my hon. Friend exclaims with some reason, where is the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw)? We are united on the vital need for the south-west to secure these major road improvements.

The overriding reason is that we need that investment to secure the economic future of our region. It is not about getting tourists there more quickly on a Saturday afternoon in August; it is about the vital economic future of the whole south-west.

Within that framework, the north Devon link road is vital. The A361 connects North Devon with the M5. It is our only viable link south and east to the rest of the country. We do not see it as North Devon’s only link to the outside world; we see it as the outside world’s only opportunity to visit us. We must ensure that it is fit for purpose, because at the moment it is not. It is a single carriageway for about 85% of the distance between Tiverton and Barnstaple, some 30 miles apart. Where it is not, it has short overtaking lanes that merge quickly into the main carriageway with little warning. That leads to risk-taking, speeding and, sadly, a high incidence of accidents in which people are killed and seriously injured, on my doorstep. It is hampering economic investment and harming the vital tourist industry.

I want to be positive. I do not want to put people off: “Come to North Devon; it is a great place to visit and do business. You will get there eventually.” I want to change the “eventually”.

I have been campaigning for major improvements since well before my election to this place. I was delighted when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor came and made certain commitments; I say to the Minister that this is the time to deliver on them. Devon County Council is doing fantastic work, thanks to the £1.5 million that the Chancellor has given us to carry out detailed planning work, including putting together a comprehensive business case. I met Devon County Council three hours ago here, and I ensured that we are driving the matter forward so we can make a bid to the local majors fund, a nearly £500 million pot created by the Chancellor.

It is part of the wider picture. The North Devon link road is vital, but it is no good if we cannot get people to the south-west to start with. That is why the A303, the A30 and the A358, championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton, are vital. They are the backbone of the region’s infrastructure. The North Devon link road is one of the vital arteries connecting it to the rest of the world. I say to the Minister that I know the Government are listening; I am not complaining that they are not. I am merely asking that we now deliver what we promised. Let us put boots on the ground and diggers on the tarmac, and let us have a yellow army of road workers to complement the blue army of Conservative MPs in the south-west.

5.7 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this important debate. It is ironic that Stonehenge, which has been around for quite some time, has until now caused a blockage to getting the work done. In fact, it has been standing for more than 5,000 years. I am sure that even then, as the stones were dragged down from Wales through my constituency, they caused an enormous queue of donkeys and carts. No doubt even then they were promised a dualling of the A303. Now, their descendants, my constituents, are at last poised on the edge of their seats as they sit in much the same queue, not daring to imagine that it will actually happen. However, I think it will this time, so I am happy to cast aside the memory of Governments committing to improve our roads and then backing down.
Our optimism increased even further with last year's publication of the road investment strategy, which set out the details of how the £2 billion—or £3 billion; I am not quite sure of the amount—will be deployed. As we have heard, the projected material benefits are vast. Dualling the A303 alone will bring 20,000 jobs and £40 billion over six years. Those are the kinds of number that mean it is a profitable investment in our future. As I have said many times before, if the west country is to compete, grow and even flourish, we must have the structure, framework and infrastructure to do so.

Given how critical the matter is, I, like my hon. Friend, would be grateful if the Minister could give us any indication when the work will begin. When will we see the cones and the contraflows on the ground? Highways England concluded its report in October by saying that the three road measures—that is, the work on the A303, the A358 and the M5—are “the first steps in our aspiration to provide an expressway between the M3 and the South West.”

So, some 5,000 years after I am sure the plans were first scratched into the west country dust with a blunt stick, I hope that now we can work together to make that aspiration a 21st-century reality.

5.10 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this debate and indeed all the hon. Members who have contributed to it. They have demonstrated the widespread concern that exists about the need for improved road infrastructure in the south-west. That concern has existed for decades, including concern about a second route through from London to the south-west. That concern has existed for decades, including concern about a second route through from London to the south-west. However, I wonder what it all means, because it is about two years ago—in this very hall, actually—that I pressed the Minister's predecessor to ensure that that study would lead to progress, but the future seems to be about as clear as mud at the moment.

The status quo pleases no one and it is necessary that we find a solution to the A303 and to Stonehenge. As far as I can see, however, the bottom end of the current cost estimates already seems to double the £410 million estimate that led Labour to review the costs back in 2005. So, can the Minister confirm when he expects a costed and timetabled set of options for the road? In the meantime, has he asked Highways England to evaluate short-term and medium-term options to improve traffic flow and alleviate congestion? Also, can he satisfy concerns that the current front-runner—a 2.9 km tunnel—would protect the integrity of the archaeological site, as required by article 4 of the world heritage convention? And in the event that the Government cannot satisfy the objective of providing a fully costed and timetabled proposal by 2017, what would he do? Would he consider, for instance, handing this work over to the National Infrastructure Commission to consider?

Neil Parish: I have a general question for the shadow Minister. In 1997, when the Labour Government came in, they cancelled the scheme to dual the road between Honiton and Ilminster, so I would just like to know whether there has been a change of policy by the Labour party.

Richard Burden: It is absolutely true—in fact, I think the hon. Gentleman said so in his opening remarks—that the history of these roads, across successive Governments, is riddled with changes of mind, delays, inquiries, and further delays and further inquiries. If I understood his opening remarks correctly, the important thing now is to interrogate the Government over the current plans, and that is where I have certain problems. I do not see a costed timetable; I do not see that the budget covers what already appears to have been committed to; and I would just like to know how the whole thing adds up. The interest that hon. Members have shown today during this debate indicates that they share my concern that we know what the figures are and what they add up
to, and that we know when—as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) said—there will be spades in the ground.

Before I finish, I will just raise a couple of other points with the Minister. As well as increasing road capacity, it is also important that we address the issues of, first, the quality of the roads and, secondly, the design of the roads, to ensure that they are as safe as possible. In its first piece of large-scale research as a watchdog, Transport Focus has identified that the top two priorities of road users in the south-west are those two things: improving the quality of roads; and ensuring that the roads have a safer design than they do now.

On the first issue—the quality of the roads—can the Minister put on the record that the Government will meet their pledge to resurface 80% of the network by 2021, as pledged in the Department for Transport’s Action for Roads 2013 document and repeated in the road investment strategy? If that is not going to be the case, perhaps he can explain what the current estimate is.

On the second issue—the safer design of roads—can the Minister offer me some assurances about what he is doing with Highways England to address the safety concerns that have been raised? In the last year, there has been an 8.4% increase in the total number of people being killed or seriously injured on the roads. And in the latest Highways England-financed road user satisfaction survey for May 2015 to October 2015, both the areas of the south-west that were surveyed saw steep drops, when compared with the figures for the previous six months, in the number of road users who said they felt safe. The surveys and the existing casualty figures seem to reveal that the Government are not doing enough to improve road safety in the south-west.

We should address these issues; I think the Minister has to address them. Perhaps it would help him to address them if the Government brought back national road safety targets, as we have often urged them to do.

In closing, I will say that Labour appreciates the infrastructure challenges in the south-west. No Government have been entirely consistent on this issue, and the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton has made that point. So it is essential that the current Government now bite the bullet and deliver genuine improvements to road routes.

However, if the Government are going to do that, there must be transparency and clarity. We need to know what the figures are. We need to know if it is £2 billion or £3 billion that is going to be spent; if it is £2 billion, then it already appears that that sum has been exceeded. And what will the Minister do on those other issues of road quality, including resurfacing roads to achieve the 80% target that the Government have committed to, and the serious concerns about road safety, which have already been revealed in surveys during the last year?

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Gray.

Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing today’s debate about upgrading road routes into the south-west. He has been a diligent campaigner on the issue for a considerable time. I was pleased to visit the area last August and to have him drive me down the A303, the A330 and the A30. There could not be a more stellar guided tour than the one he delivers. That visit brought home to me the importance of the lesson we learnt a few years ago: that the south-west needs resilience in its road network. Transport is a key driver of the economy, and an improved network will not only enable better journeys but boost growth. Last year the Chancellor noted that although the south-west accounts for 8.4% of the UK’s population, it accounts for only 7.5% of its economic output. A major reason for that is that the south-west has to put up with slow, unreliable journeys on congested roads, especially between the region and the south-east of England. If the south-west is not to fall further behind, major road investment is needed.

Many hon. Friends have highlighted clearly the importance of road investment in their areas. I was asked specifically about timing, and I will come on to that as I address some of the schemes. In December 2014, the Government launched the road investment strategy, outlining how £15.2 billion will be spent on our strategic roads between now and 2020-21. That is the biggest upgrade to our strategic roads in a generation. Within the strategy, the Government announced that they intend to upgrade the remaining sections of the A303 between the M3 and the A358 to dual carriageway standard. We are also creating a link from the M5 at Taunton to the A303, as part of the long-term commitment to create a new expressway to the south-west, connecting the M3 through to the M5 at expressway quality.

We intend to start the process with three major improvements as part of the A303-A30-A358-corridor package of commitments. The £2 billion budget, which is for only those commitments—it is not the overall budget for the south-west—will help to deliver much-needed resilience for the region. Part of that work has to address the iconic and historically important site of Stonehenge. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) has raised that issue with me many times, with his customary tenacity and command of detail. We will build a tunnel at least 1.8 miles in length, to preserve the world heritage site at Stonehenge.

John Glen: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. There seems to be some ambiguity concerning the process at this time, given that Highways England is examining alternative routes. Will the Minister clarify the purpose of that evaluation?

Andrew Jones: It is always appropriate to consider options broadly to ensure that the scheme is absolutely the right one, but there is no doubt whatsoever here; we are committed to delivering a 1.8-mile tunnel at Stonehenge. Our objective is to be able to stand at the stones and not see cars. The tunnel will transform the experience of that important part of our national heritage, and at the same time remove an environmental problem and an traffic problem. We should not, however, confuse the development consent order process requirement to show that different options have been exhausted with reneging
upon our commitment. That commitment is strong, and we are working on it closely with environmental and heritage groups. The scheme has strong support from the National Trust and English Heritage; I have met with them at the stones and discussed the issue with them.

On timing, there will be a formal consultation on the scheme early next year. It will go through the development consent order process—part of the planning process—in 2018. We would expect to start works on the scheme in early 2020. We have to get that right, but I hope that that timing provides some comfort.

Dr Murrison: I listen to the Minister’s remarks with great interest. Does he agree that it would not be helpful if we sorted out the extraordinarily difficult conundrum of Stonehenge, which will be incredibly expensive, and yet did not deal with low-hanging fruit? I am thinking particularly of the village of Chicklade, since the problem will simply be shunted further west.

Andrew Jones: That is a valuable point. The scheme is not the only one we are considering for the area. When we consider schemes, they are in a network, and if one part of the network is changed there are consequential implications that we have to work through. I am conscious of time, so I need to press on rapidly.

We will dual the A303 from Sparkford to Ilchester and the A358 from Taunton to Southfields to deliver quicker, safer and more reliable journeys. Concerning the timing, we will begin the public consultation on the Sparkford to Ilchester section and on the A358 enhancements later this year, with Highways England set to make a recommendation to the Government in 2017.

Neil Parish: I very much welcome what has been said about upgrading the A303 all the way through to the A358, but one of the purposes of the debate was to talk about Ilminster to Honiton, which the Minister seems to have failed to mention—

Andrew Jones: As yet.

Neil Parish: As yet. [Laughter]

Andrew Jones: Much as I enjoy my hon. Friend’s speeches, I say to him, “Give me a chance here.” I am conscious of the time.

On the scheme for the A303, we expect to get a development consent order in 2018 and to start works in early 2020. The importance of that scheme was mentioned to me by my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who highlighted its economic impact on her constituency.

Let us take the A303-A30 section between Southfield and Honiton, in which my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton is particularly interested. I was very grateful for the guided tour he gave me in the summertime. I recognise that large-scale improvements are overdue, but this is a sensitive area. Highways England is working with Devon County Council—they are meeting later this week as part of their regular dialogue. We have not forgotten the route, but the topography and the protected landscape surrounding it in the Blackdown hills is sensitive. I also acknowledge the safety record on that stretch of single carriageway. All the points that my hon. Friend made about it are true and the matter is being considered. It is not part of our first round of schemes, but it is not off the agenda; it is being worked up, with local input, and I hope that he will continue to have an input into that.

I must mention some other schemes that we are undertaking in the area. We are investing in dualling the last single-carriageway gap on the A30 into Cornwall. We will have an expressway-standard road running all the way from Exeter to Camborne. On timing, we will have a public consultation this year. I anticipate that Highways England will make a recommendation to the Government in about a year’s time, and that there will be a development consent order in 2018, with works starting in early 2020.

Those are, however, not the only schemes that we are developing in the area. We have the new junction of the M49, to provide access to the enterprise zone at Avonmouth, and we will start works on that in 2017. There are other enhancements along the M5, particularly with a view to unlocking development sites at Hinkley Point. A significant amount of work is taking place. We are addressing pinch points, such as the Air Balloon roundabout.

It is not as if we are just starting work; work is already under way. It was great to come down to Devon only last Monday to open the south Devon highway, which connects Newton Abbot and Torbay. That marvellous and significant project had a great response from local councils and communities. We are also, of course, working on the A30 Temple to Higher Carblake section. When I visited last summer—my goodness, that was a properly wet day; perhaps Cornwall has more than one of them.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Jones: I have about 30 seconds left, so perhaps my hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not.

We are working with local partners throughout the schemes. The north Devon link road is an important project. The Government have provided £1.5 million to help develop the business case and we will continue to look at that. Members are right to champion that project. The north-south access from Dorset is clearly overdue. I have met with local enterprise partnerships and councils in the area and we have a further meeting planned to discuss the issue. We are already on the case, and Highways England, the Department for Transport and local authorities are working on it. We are not changing the road investment strategy’s content; our question now is about delivering it.

Road safety was mentioned. Road safety is at the heart of the road investment strategy and we published our road safety statement in December last year.

There might have been other points. I am not sure whether I have addressed all the points; if I have not, I will write to colleagues.

5.29 pm

Neil Parish: The blue army here today, comprising some 14 Members, shows how serious we are about getting great roads infrastructure in the south-west. We welcome the Minister’s words, but now we want to see delivery and we want it done quickly. I thank Members for the great support I have had today. Let us get on with the job. Let us get the roads moving in the south-west.
and let us ensure that the region becomes the land of milk and honey and a powerhouse for the west country, along with the north of England and all parts of the country. It is essential that we do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered the upgrading of road routes into the South West.

5.30 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 2 March 2016

[MR NIGEL EVANS in the Chair]

Southeastern Train Services

9.30 am

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the reliability of Southeastern train services.

It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, and I welcome the Minister. We had hoped to meet her to discuss the Southeastern situation before this debate, but we are here now and perhaps it is better to discuss it in public, so that people know what is said.

The situation that we have found ourselves in since Christmas is not entirely the fault of Southeastern—Network Rail is responsible for more than 70% of the failures—but quite frankly my constituents do not care who is to blame. They want their trains to turn up on time, as stated on the timetable, and to take them where they need to go. Since Christmas, the situation has deteriorated significantly. Trains are constantly being delayed, cancelled or diverted, and the landslide took services out for about a week.

My constituents and those of other hon. Members are bombarding us with complaints and angry messages. I will give a few examples. One constituent complained about the “appalling level of service provided by Southeastern on the evening of Friday 19...Trains reduced from 8 and 12 carriages to only four”.

Another wrote:

“Terrible service on the Sidcup line...Constant complaints to Southeastern but no improvements despite repeated promises”.

One constituent said that when the first Bexleyheath service of the day was cancelled, he found that he could not use his season ticket to get the bus and tube from North Greenwich, because it was not recognised by Southeastern as a “reasonable alternative route”. Someone else complained about the “appalling and deteriorating levels of service on the Sidcup line”, which also serves part of my constituency. She regularly uses the delay-repay compensation scheme, which she found to be “clunky and time consuming”. I will come to that later, but I have received constant complaints about difficulties in claiming compensation for lateness or cancellations. Another person complained about constant delays after Christmas in a commute to London Bridge:

“Been commuting for 40 years and never complained before. Worst it has ever been.”

It just goes on and on, and I am sure other hon. Members could give similar examples.

To give my own experience during this chaos, on one occasion I managed to get a train in the direction of Eltham as far as Lewisham, from where there was supposed to be a replacement bus service. It was impossible to find the bus stop for the replacement service; the signage was appalling. I approached a group of staff, who were clearly beleaguered, and asked them when the bus service was likely to arrive, but they had no idea. I asked, “Where does it stop?” and they waved in the general direction of the outside of the station. I felt sorry for them, but they were not providing a good service, although that has to be because they had not been provided with the information by the rail company.

On another occasion—it was the same scenario—I went outside the station to get a bus and found a blind man wandering around the building works. I do not know if anyone else has had the pleasure of trying to find a way through the roadworks outside Lewisham station, but it is difficult for someone who is not blind. Yet I found that man just wandering around. I grabbed him by the arm and asked, “Where do you want to go?” He wanted to go in the same direction as me, but how is it that he was not given assistance? Why were the staff not on the lookout for people who clearly needed such assistance? He wanted to get to Bexleyheath; he could have been put on the replacement bus service, but was given no help whatever.

On another occasion, going home late in the evening on a Bexleyheath train, we got to Lewisham only to be told that the train was no longer for Bexleyheath, but for Sidcup. People on the train just got up and blocked the doors. They were so fed up with what was going on that they stood with their feet in the doors and said, “We’re not putting up with this anymore.” When they saw me—I had got off the train and was wandering across to see if a train was ever going to be going in the general direction of Eltham—they said, “We’re protesting—we’re fed up with this.” I do not know what the end of that scenario was, but it demonstrates the scale of the frustration that people are feeling about the standard of the service.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. The Labour party may be divided over its leadership, and the Conservative party over Europe, but what unites us all is Southeastern. It is fair to say that its service has deteriorated of late. Does he agree that Southeastern seems to have all but given up on getting its franchise renewed?

Clive Efford: That is a worry and something the Minister should consider. If that is the case, the Government should take the franchise away now, because if Southeastern is going to look at its bottom line rather than the quality of the service, passengers will continue to suffer. That was a prime example of giving way to someone and them coming up with a better line in their intervention than I have in my speech, so I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on pulling all that together.

People in south-eastern London have suffered for decades. We had the disastrous privatisation that gave us the Connex franchise. We then had a period of relative stability, when the franchise was taken back in-house—in effect, nationalised—but that was followed by the ridiculous decision under the Labour Government to reprivatise it. I opposed that at the time, but we are where we are.

Passengers who use London Bridge station understand that the Thameslink scheme is bound to cause disruption. They have accepted that, despite the chaos at Christmas 2014. At the time, the Minister accepted that there had been an unacceptable deterioration in the service and she took action—I commend her for that—but this year’s performance has deteriorated to an all-time low. Passengers had accepted that train patterns would be substantially altered and that regular journeys had to
change, because trains that people were used to catching might no longer be going to Cannon Street or Charing Cross, but the level of disruption they are suffering now is nothing to do with that. On the lines between Dartford and London Bridge, the service has failed, although when we had discussions before the Thameslink works started, we were told that the situation was under control. As I said, my constituents do not care who is to blame; they want to know that the tickets they purchase will get them to where they want to go.

I am grateful to the Library for an excellent paper it has produced to provide Members with information for this debate. It sets out how the public performance measure is calculated. The PPM shows the percentage of trains that arrive at their terminating station on time and combines figures for punctuality and reliability into a single performance measure. It is the industry standard for measuring performance, but it does not distinguish between extreme lateness and a brief delay. Southeastern’s PPM has fallen from 91.3% 12 months ago to 83.2% now. The average for all operators is 89.3%, so we are way below that. Another measure is right-time performance, which uses the percentage of trains arriving at their terminating station early or within 59 seconds of schedule. Southeastern’s right-time performance has fallen from 65.2% 12 months ago to 53.5% now. The average for all operators is 64.8%. Again, it is well below average.

The cancellation and significant lateness measure is for when a train is cancelled at origin or en route—this was my experience on the train that was going to Bexleyheath but then went to Sidcup—and when the originating station is changed or the train is diverted. A train is significantly late if it arrives at its terminating station 30 minutes or more late. On that measure, 2.4% of Southeastern trains were cancelled or significantly late 12 months ago, but the figure is now 4.3%—it has nearly doubled—while the average for all operators is 3%.

On every single measure we see poor performance from Southeastern. In autumn 2015, Passenger Focus showed that Southeastern’s passenger satisfaction was 75%, down from a high of 84% in 2013. In autumn 2015, the Chiltern franchise had the highest satisfaction rate, at 91%. The bottom three ranked operators were Thameslink, Southern—they are franchised as Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern—and Southeastern, which share the common factor of going into London Bridge. That must account for some of the dissatisfaction that people have with the service.

Last week, Which? published its annual passenger satisfaction survey. Southeastern was placed joint last, with an overall score of 46%, last year it was at 45%. Which? considers the impression of passengers over the previous year of the service provided. The difference between that and the Passenger Focus survey is that Passenger Focus considers the last journey that passengers made. That can be open to all sorts of factors, which can distort the figure. I would say that the Which? methodology far more accurately reflects the passenger experience than that of Passenger Focus, which is now Transport Focus. Those figures demonstrate just how consistently poor the service has been.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am sorry that the fracture clinic will prevent me from being here for the entirety of the debate. I thank and congratulate the hon. Gentleman for holding this debate. Many of my constituents have experienced the same difficulties he has described. While I believe there will be better times around the corner once the track and station at London Bridge are developed, I am still concerned that we are short of capacity on these lines. Does he agree that it would be a huge concern if plans to give the Mayor of London wider powers for outer London were to affect the capacity further south? Does he also agree that to free up capacity we need a high-speed rail link from Bexhill and Hastings to St Pancras to create more capacity for his constituents?

Clive Efford: I wish the hon. Gentleman luck in pursuing his scheme; I have got my own, which I will come to shortly. I have to say, Transport for London cannot be worse than Southeastern. It has had a positive impact when it has taken over other lines in similar circumstances, so hopefully it can achieve what Network Rail and Southeastern have failed to achieve in south-east London. Key bottlenecks such as Lewisham have to be overcome to achieve some of the things that Transport for London is talking about. I remain sceptical about whether it can achieve everything it says it can, but I am prepared to run with it and to be a critical friend, guiding it along the path of improving our train services in south-east London.

We need to hold people to account for what the figures demonstrate is consistent failure. The Minister did take action last Christmas when the service was appalling and there was a dangerous number of passengers on the concourse at London Bridge, but we must do more. To quote the Minister back at herself, on 28 January she admitted to the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) that

“Southeastern was not at the top of the list for overall satisfaction. It is not quite at the bottom, but it is not at the top either.”—[Official Report, 28 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 526.]

It was actually second from bottom and it has been so consistently. The Minister was reluctant to call it how it is, but we do our constituents a disservice when we do not do that. We really need to call it how it is to hold these people to account.

One concern I have about accountability is that the penalties that the franchise operators are required to pay the Government if they fail in their obligations are required to be shrouded in commercial confidentiality, as are the payments made if they overperform. I would like to see some examples of overperformance—it would cheer me up no end. Why is that shrouded in secrecy? It is public money and a public service, so there should be public accountability. The Government should be proud to say, “We have penalised this franchise” when it fails our constituents. They should say, “Yes, we have made them pay a price and forced them to reinvest this money in this way to address this failure.” We should not say to the companies, “You can come and run a public service. You can hide behind commercial confidentiality and not let people know the price being paid.” All too often we see these people paying themselves huge bonuses in public services after such failures and that is not acceptable.

I want the Minister to ensure that we can see how the companies are being penalised for failures, because of the effect of those failures on people’s lives. They are late for work, late for job interviews, late getting a connecting train. We have all travelled on these train
services that get stuck, and we have heard people’s life stories on their mobile phones as they go into meltdown around us because of delays. It is not right that the companies are not held publicly accountable when their failure is on such a scale.

Given the scale of the problem, the compensation scheme seems to be underused by passengers. Something needs to be done about that, because if we can make compensation easily accessible the companies might start to consider the standard of their performance a little better. People are eligible for compensation after their train is delayed for 30 minutes. The compensation scale goes up to 100% refund for 60-minute delays, but according to the Library’s document no figures are available for take-up. I suggest that take-up is extremely low. The Office of Rail and Road found that just 11% of passengers surveyed nationally always or usually claimed compensation when they were entitled to it; 15% said they rarely claimed; and 68% said that they never complained.

We clearly need to do more to encourage passengers to come forward. Rather than come to their Member of Parliament, because they see us as the only outlet to vent their spleen, perhaps they could by right claim their compensation and make their voices heard directly with the franchise operators. Which is running a campaign to make rail refunds easier that calls for “clear information on how to get a refund for rail delays…all train companies offering cash as the first option” and for train companies “to be held to account if they fail to encourage passengers to claim refunds.”

I commend that campaign to the Minister and urge her to support it.

The Minister said on 28 January: “We effectively now have rail fares going up at the lowest level” —[Official Report, 28 January 2016: Vol. 605, c. 526.] Is that absolutely correct? I have figures that say an annual season ticket from Eltham to central London has gone up by £328 a year—33%—since 2010. I do not think it is true. People are being forced to pay more for a service that clearly is not up to the standard they have a right to expect.

I know that an announcement is pending about increased capacity on our rail services—12-car trains. I have been campaigning on that for 15 years and been fobbed off with “The electricity supply isn’t up to it. The platforms aren’t long enough. We have terrible bottlenecks at Lewisham and London Bridge. Twelve-car trains are such a drag,” and all the rest of it. The fact is that in south-east London we do not have direct access to the London underground. Most of our journeys are like spokes of a wheel, going in to central London and the main terminals at London Bridge, Charing Cross, Waterloo and others. Our constituents rely heavily on those services and have few alternatives. Buses do not really provide an alternative for journeys of that length, nor do buses have the capacity for the number of people who want to make those journeys. There is a transport deficit in south-east London.

We constantly hear from the people at Transport for London about how much TfL must invest in the London underground and how important it is to increase capacity, and I get that. I understand how vital it is to London. However, TfL is even calling the new underground line going through New Cross the orbital route; that is how far TfL thinks London goes out—as far as New Cross. People outside its orbit are Pluto, or something. Because we do not have direct access to alternatives, our rail services are vital.

For too long people have been crammed on to overcrowded carriages, particularly at peak times. This morning, for example, I was waiting at the station at 7.35 at Eltham. The Victoria train came in and it was six carriages long, at peak time. It is not acceptable. The train that I caught to Charing Cross was eight carriages long. At those times of the day they should be 12-car trains. Trains are packed by the time they get to places such as Eltham, Kidbrooke and Blackheath; anyone getting on at Lewisham needs a crowbar. It is not acceptable. We have got to have increased capacity on our rail services.

TfL is very keen to take over the service and it would have my blessing, but as I said, I will be a critical friend. If it is going to increase the frequency of trains on the service it will have to deal with the signalling system. It is no good putting more frequent trains through with fewer carriages; we need more capacity. I will support TfL’s bid for the metro services on Southeastern, but we need to ensure that the Government and MPs scrutinise what it says about what it will deliver. We need to improve the service and increase its capacity significantly.

The landslide caused me great concern. I thought, “What if it had happened as a train was going by?” which was likely highly, because the vibration of a train could have exacerbated the situation and brought a landslide down. Some infrastructure was involved, so I want to know if a proper survey of the infrastructure has been done. As I said, more than 70% of the delays have been due to signals and infrastructure under the control of Network Rail. Does it survey the infrastructure to the point at which it identifies likely problems and puts them right, so that they do not become constant nagging problems and a cause of future delays? It seems that the system is cracking at the seams. Is Network Rail on top of that? I would like the Minister’s assurance that she is on top of Network Rail, and that she will ensure it tries to drive out the gremlins that cause all the problems for Southeastern and our constituents.

As I have mentioned, I want the penalties and rewards for train operating companies’ performance to be published and the people concerned held to account. I would like the Minister to put pressure on the transport operating companies to make people aware of compensation schemes. Above all I want the Government and TfL to recognise that south-east London has a transport deficit, which cannot continue to be ignored when the future expansion of rail services, including such things as the underground and the docklands light railway, is considered. The situation in south-east London is unacceptable. I look forward to hearing what the Minister intends to do about it.

Several Hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. As we can see, seven hon. Members want to speak. I will start the winding up speeches at 10.38, which gives 10 minutes each, plus two minutes for Mr Efford to wind up. Please do the maths, but I think we are looking at perhaps just under five minutes each.
9.57 am

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) for calling this important debate. I stand here as the representative of two communities—the one that relies on and is tortured by the Tonbridge line, and the one that is tortured by the Maidstone East line. On their behalf I voice my displeasure at Southeastern’s woeful performance, not just in the past three months, which—let us face it—have been particularly awful, but in the 10 months for which I have represented my constituents, and indeed many years before that.

I have had the great privilege of meeting some people from Southeastern, and only this week I heard that they believed they were still meeting their franchise targets. I do not know quite to the smallest detail how the franchise targets are met, but if their belief is correct it tells me something simple—that the franchise targets are wrong. It cannot be right that one in five trains is coming in late, leaving workers late for meetings, leaving families without a father or mother at home for dinner, and forcing people to change plans—and that is still somehow acceptable in relation to meeting targets.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I share my hon. Friend’s concern about Southeastern’s performance. I have travelled by train for the past 15 years, but now, as a Member of Parliament, I do so every day; and it is the regular day in, day out delay, even if it is a few minutes, that means a lot to my constituents. If Southeastern cannot perform it should do as c2c does. After two minutes, if there is a delay, there should be automatic compensation for constituents.

**Tom Tugendhat**: I agree entirely and thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I have spoken to the Rail Minister about it, and am delighted that she is in her place, because I know she is addressing those very points. I know I am not speaking against her but in support of her as she fights for all our constituents.

**Gareth Johnson** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): On that point about compensation, does my hon. Friend agree that the “delay repay” scheme should kick in far earlier than the 30 minutes that the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) alluded to? Perhaps compensation for passengers who are delayed should commence after 15 minutes.

**Tom Tugendhat**: My hon. Friend is right; we need to get responsiveness into the system, and the way to do so, I am afraid, is through the pocketbook, as we all know.

I was canvassing in Old Bexley and Sidcup this weekend for the Conservative party’s wonderful mayoral candidate, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith). I know that he will be working hard on this issue and ensuring that the trains respond significantly better to his constituents, although perhaps not mine. In his seat as well, the pressure on the trains is great, so I hope he will forgive me as I take his name in vain and press for a better service in Old Bexley and Sidcup.

I have been calling for more rail carriages on the Maidstone East line in my own area. The carriages introduce at least an element—I know that is not all of it—of resilience and flexibility into the system. That is why I raised only this week with Southeastern the question of what more it can do. It said, “Well, we could have a few more drivers on stand-by.” I asked why it was not doing that, and it said, “It’s not about the money.” I ask Southeastern again here today: why is it not doing that? If this is not about money, and if more carriages and more drivers allow for a bit of resilience and flexibility, surely that is the right thing to do for people across our county.

This is a county-wide problem. Tonbridge is the heart of the Kent rail network and, as Members will know, is the most important rail exchange in the county. Indeed, it has running through it one of the longest pieces of straight track in the United Kingdom. It was built in days when the Victorians did not value the land around the beautiful weald of Kent or the extraordinary richness of our communities. However, that is not true today. Our communities are the most blessed and the most beautiful in our country, and those train lines now provide the opportunity for some of the finest people in our entire kingdom to get to work and to generate the income that pays for the schools, hospitals and, indeed, armed forces across our country. It is therefore essential that we look at these rail networks not as a luxury—they are not that—or as some way of getting people home or to work on time, with 15 minutes here or there being just a problem, but as a fundamental part of the British economy.

It is essential we get this right, and the only way to do that is by holding the people who run the rails and the trains to account. This is not a question of public ownership or private ownership. It is not an ideological question for us to discuss; I think one Member of the House of Lords recently described the Opposition as “croissant eating”. No—this is a very important question about how we deliver results for our people. I am adamant that we forget the ideology and focus on what matters: delivery, delivery, delivery.

10.2 am

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I do not want to repeat the points that have been made today but rather touch in my remarks on three particular issues that affect my constituents: the delays and overcrowding.

I now receive complaints about late, cancelled or overcrowded Southeastern train services nearly every day. As a commuter, I know just how frustrating not
only major disruptions but the disruptions and delays that happen every single day can be. Whether it is two minutes here or five minutes there, it is often without explanation and without any reason. We see frustration to the people waiting, who cannot get adequate compensation and are not regularly notified. The 7.39 train this morning fromDeptford was cancelled without explanation, forcing people on to other lines or tube lines such as the Jubilee line which are already crowded.

Rehman Chishti: The hon. Gentleman echoes a point I have made before. If there are constant daily delays, and if Southeastern cannot get its act together—whether that is through trains with more carriages or ensuring that trains run on time—it should surely give up the franchise to someone who can do it.

Matthew Pennycook: I think that Southeastern has lost the chance it had to restore faith and confidence in its service. The franchise should be removed. I would like to hear the Minister’s view on whether that should happen now or in 2018, when the contract lapses. However, Southeastern has lost the opportunity to recover that confidence.

The complaints and the frustration have given rise to a number of community groups in my constituency. I think of the Charlton Rail Users’ Group and the Greenwich Line Users’ Group, which exist solely to represent constituents’ concerns about the inadequate performance of Southeastern and to lobby for better services. Those groups are concerned with the three elements I mentioned.

The first element is overcrowded carriages. In late 2014, as a local councillor, I met the then managing director of Southeastern trains with my predecessor, the right hon. Nick Raynsford. We were promised that there would be 12-car trains by January 2015 on the Greenwich line. They did not materialise. I believe that that was because they were put on the Lewisham line, which if anything is more pressured in terms of capacity constraints. It is essential that we get those 12-car carriages, because on many occasions at the moment we do not even have 10-car carriages; as my hon. Friend the Member forEltham said, they are often carriages with eight cars or even less.

Southeastern, to give it its due, has squeezed out as much as it perhaps can in terms of enhancements via changes to the timetable. It now comes down to a question of rolling stock. There has been a delay in the Government’s announcement on rolling stock. I will be interested to hear whether the Minister can shed any light on what may be coming forward, in particular for the Greenwich line.

It is indicative of how Southeastern has planned the improvements to its services that even if we get those 12-car trains, some of the stations on the Greenwich line in my constituency, such as Woolwich Dockyard, will not be able to have those trains stopping at the station because the station has not been fitted in a way that allows 12-car trains to stop, or if the trains are able to stop, it will be with selective door operating to allow people to get on and off at those stations. I would like some assurance that if 12-car trains do come online, the people who will be put out by that problem will get fair compensation if they have to travel onwards to another station, such as Woolwich Arsenal.

I turn to service reliability, which, as Members have said, is extremely poor on these lines. By the magic of social media, I asked my constituents if they had any thoughts or comments in advance of this debate. I asked them to keep it clean, which reduced the number of responses. You could not make up some of the responses I got back. One gentleman told me that the 6.01 pm train yesterday on the Greenwich line was delayed for 30 minutes because of problems with the announcement system; passengers learn that from the driver via the announcement system. That is quite a common example of the bizarre things that happen. I was once on a train that had to stop and wait outside London Bridge because the sun was in the driver’s eyes. That sort of service just irritates people, frankly, when they are paying a lot of money for their train journeys.

I will finish on poor communication. I made the case long in advance of the London Bridge rebuild that communication about the disruption that would take place because of the Thameslink programme was inadequate. My constituents still regularly think that the Charing Cross line is going to be restored on the Greenwich line; it is not. I think there are good reasons why it should not be, in terms of improvements of trains and reliability, but some of my constituents do not know that. Communication in general is poor and needs to improve.

Turning to the future, I fully support the removal of the Southeastern franchise. There is a good case for Transport for London taking over these services in partnership with the Mayor. The way that that potential deal was announced a few weeks back was rather shabby and got mixed up with the election campaign, but there is general cross-party consensus on that. Some of us have been campaigning on it for a long time. We need to scrutinise that deal. In particular, we need assurances that in the years left to the Southeastern franchise up to 2018 it will not be allowed to let performance slip even further. It has an incentive, as part of the service groups, to perhaps bid for elements of Transport for London’s services once it is taken over in 2018. However, we need to know how Southeastern can be pressed in the years ahead, if it is going to lose its contract, to not let performance slip even further. I will be interested to hear the Minister’s views on that.

10.9 am

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I will try to be brief and keep to your advised timing, Mr Evans.

I congratulate the hon. Member forEltham (Clive Efford) on securing the debate and thank him for asking many important questions about infrastructure, compensation and penalties.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), since becoming a Member of Parliament last May I have received a steady flow of complaints about the problems with Southeastern rail services on the line that goes through Maidstone East in particular, and on the lines from Faversham and Headcorn. Since Christmas, however, that flow of complaints has accelerated, reflecting a substantial deceleration in the train services and their reliability. Regular weekly complaints from people have now become daily complaints, as day in, day out, their trains to and from work are delayed, and not just by two or three minutes, which is irritating
and causes difficulties for people, but often by half an hour or an hour, with train cancellations, too. Many major events have also completely kyboshed the services for hours.

Other hon. Members have shared the data so I will not go through those again now, but as my hon. Friend said, we are now seeing about one in five trains running late. What the averaging of the data obscures is how often it is the same train that somebody is delayed on, day after day, and how very often they are the peak-time trains. That is not to say that other trains do not need to be on time, but we know that people on peak-time trains are rushing to get to and from work and to get to meetings, appointments and other commitments. The trains are rushing to get to and from work and to get home to put children to bed. All these things that people build their lives around and make decisions about are being affected so seriously by the problems with the train services at the moment.

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point about the delays and what they mean for people’s lives. Linked to that point is the fact that if somebody gets to the station and their train is delayed, when they do get on a train, it is packed. They cannot even get a seat, so it is also about the conditions they face. The argument to be made to the Minister and Southeastern is that there should be the extra carriage. I appreciate that Southeastern and Network Rail have made some effort to communicate with Members such as me, who have been in frequent contact with them, urging them to give us explanations. They have told us about the problem at Dover with the sea wall coming down and how that has made things more difficult for them. They have told us about landslips because of the extra rail, signalling problems with the upgrades and problems with de-icing. The Minister may well cover that in more detail. We understand that it is not always easy to provide a good service and that things happen, but still, that is not good enough. We also appreciate that they are making efforts to improve the services, with extra drivers, more engineers and de-icing at milder temperatures. Those are steps in the right direction, but still, I am afraid that I do not have confidence on behalf of my constituents that these services are going to improve sufficiently to provide a reliable and acceptable level of service.

I say that having directly asked Southeastern and Network Rail just a couple of days ago, face to face, how good the service was going to be as a result of the changes they are making. They were unable to say. They were unable to say even what improvement they are aiming to achieve as a result of the changes. There was a bit of a shrug of the shoulders—“We’re trying”—and that is not just not good enough. Along with their warning that the problems with the sea wall at Dover might continue through to the end of this year and with London Bridge work continuing through all of next year, this will drag on for two years at best. My constituents need to know that they will get a better service within that time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling said, we also found it bizarre that, given all that is going on with the service—I appreciate that both Southeastern and Network Rail are involved, although that answer is not acceptable to passengers—we are told by Southeastern that it is compliant with its franchise. That suggests that something simply is not right with the way in which it is held to account.

Along with solutions to the short-term problems, we need to start seeing some plans for better service beyond the next couple of years. We are seeing enormous population growth across Kent—my constituency is part of that—and there is infrastructure there that is often 50 or more than 100 years old. It is simply not fit for the level of use that it is getting. Although we have had High Speed 1, for my constituents that is largely a myth. They sometimes get trains that are called “high speed”, but after a short stretch of going at high speed, the trains just clunk along on the old infrastructure and are scarcely faster than the ordinary service, although they are more expensive. The high-speed service simply bypasses most of my constituents who commute on the Maidstone East line. Other parts of the country are getting High Speed 2, Crossrail and great investment. Given all this population growth and with the economy being so dependent on the productivity of all these people—their quality of life is an issue as well—we need to know that there is material investment coming down the line, no pun intended, in the train infrastructure, so that beyond the short-term problems, we will see an improvement in quality.

Will the Minister say what she is going to do to make sure that Network Rail and Southeastern get on top of the problems in the short term? We cannot let them continue all year and next year. We need to ensure better transparency for passengers so that they also know what is going on with performance. We need better communication and to know such things as the level of compensation that is paid out, as well as make sure that it is easy for passengers to get it. When possible, compensation should be automated.

I share the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) that although it feels as though nothing could be worse than it is now, if the franchise for the suburban lines goes to Transport for London, we must not see passengers further out lose out as a result. Finally, I would like the Minister to provide reassurance that work is being done on how to improve the service further out, given the population growth. We know that London Bridge is being refurbished—trains from my constituency do not go into London Bridge—but there is no confidence that that will be a magical improvement, so what is going to be done further out to improve the performance, reliability, speed and quality of the services for my constituents?

10.17 am

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) on securing the debate.
I have just one train line running through my constituency—two tracks, three stations, one train line. What could go wrong? Well, Southeastern could go wrong, that’s what. I was elected in 2010 and have used the train line since then, but I also used it as a commuter for 20 years beforehand. Before Southeastern, we had Connex, which was terrible. We thought Southeastern would be better, but we were wrong.

I have a real appreciation, as many in this Chamber do, of the frustration of standing on a platform in the certain knowledge of the uncertainty of the train service—wondering whether the train will arrive on time, or at all; whether we will be told what is happening; whether the train will be full when it gets there; whether, once it sets off from the station, it will actually arrive at the other end at the specified time. Commuters have a feeling of being resigned to the inevitable about Southeastern. If they have to be at a meeting a certain time, they will aim for two trains earlier than the one they actually need to get, because they know that the timetable may, on many mornings, be a work of fiction.

During my first five years as an MP, complaints were of the kind that one would expect—they were about unreliability, late-running trains, overpriced tickets, a lack of information—and that discontent was borne out in the passenger focus surveys. There was therefore both some surprise and horror when Southeastern was re-awarded the franchise. At that point, we were told that things were going to improve and that, for instance, there would be more seats. At a meeting that the Railways Minister held in one of the Committee Rooms in Parliament about 18 months ago, I remember pressing Southeastern about those extra seats. I remember my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham doing that, and at that point, Southeastern admitted that there were extra seats but that they were on off-peak services—so absolutely no use whatsoever.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham raised a point about compensation. Every time I contact Southeastern, it says, “Don’t forget to remind your constituent that they can claim compensation.” Compensation is fair enough, but people want a service; they want what they have paid for. If someone keeps going to a shop to buy something that breaks every time, despite the shop saying it will give them their money back, they will stop going there. What happens on Southeastern is that people do not have an alternative and that has a knock-on effect on the clogging up of the A2. People are taking to their cars because they cannot rely on the train service.

It is interesting that since saying that people should claim compensation, Southeastern seems to have changed its compensation for season ticket holders. It wrote to a constituent, a season ticket holder, setting out the formula it is now using: it calculates the number of journeys it thinks the season ticket holder will make in a year and divides the price by that. Southeastern is part of Govia, which divides the season ticket price by 464 journeys, but Southeastern decided to divide it by 546 journeys, which is less generous. The compensation is not generous anyway, but Southeastern’s calculation makes it even less generous. I believe Southeastern has decided to do that because it is getting more complaints and more claims for compensation. Will the Minister look at that to see why Southeastern is using a different formula from the rest of the group?

My hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) referred to 12-car trains, saying that Woolwich Dockyard is a problem. I have been pressing for 12-car trains on the Greenwich line for a long time, knowing that Southeastern cannot run them on that line because of the Woolwich Dockyard problem, but there is an answer: selective door opening. When I originally wrote to Southeastern, it said there were 12-car trains on my line. I wrote back saying, “No, there aren’t, but what time do they run? I want to get one tomorrow.” Southeastern came back to me saying, “Oh no, actually they’re not on your line,” and then blamed the council, saying that it could not run the trains because the council had complained about Woolwich Dockyard. So it was saying, “We can’t run the 12-car trains that we don’t actually have.” Its responses were nonsense and typical of its disrespect.

Eventually, Southeastern said that if it gets 12-car trains it will not run them on my service even if there is no problem at Woolwich Dockyard, because although my line is bad, the Sidcup line is worse and that line will get those trains. It then wrote to me and other hon. Members asking us to lobby the Minister to help it to get 12-car trains. That just added insult to injury.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham said that it appears that Southeastern has given up, but in case it ever diversifies into bus operation, I want to illustrate a point. Currently, it is running a rail replacement bus service at weekends from Abbey Wood station because work is going on every weekend on the new Crossrail. I had an email from a constituent who had recently used the service. The journey from Abbey Wood to Woolwich Arsenal, which should take five minutes, took an hour. The bus did not arrive until 20 minutes after the scheduled time; it took my constituent to the next station, Plumstead, where they waited 30 minutes for a train, which was cancelled with no information announced. My constituent then gave up and took a bus to Woolwich. When I wrote to Southeastern to complain, its response was:

“I am sorry for the excessive delay on the replacement bus service. To be honest, I have no explanation as it would have been quicker to walk!”

That is no way to run a railway. Southeastern has given up. Complaints about its service are becoming more frequent than the services themselves.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank the hon. Member for Clive Ewood for securing this debate. I know how important the train service is for his constituents. It is also important for my constituents, who live only 26 miles from London. Since being elected to the House, I have had to commute to London for the first time in 15 years. Hon. Members will have heard me say that I do not see an improvement in the delays to the service. It has been an eye-opening exercise to see what my constituents face daily.

In Rochester, we have been lucky to have the wonderful investment of a £20-million station. It was much needed and long anticipated, and we are grateful for it. Sadly, however, the shine has been taken off it because since it was opened in December, passengers have seen the service decline rapidly, with delays, cancelled trains and lack of communication. One reason why my constituents were so excited about the new station was the hope of more
train services, using the longer platforms and the potential for increased capacity. Sadly, that has been completely overshadowed by the events since Christmas.

People were hoping that the new station and the longer platforms would enable longer trains to be run, so that they could have seats on the train in the morning—like people in Eltham, my constituents in Rochester struggle with capacity. In north Kent, particularly the Medway towns, we are being expected to deliver high housing numbers over the next 15 years. In Medway we are looking at a 30,000 increase in 15 to 20 years. Southeastern agrees that it has had a 40% increase in capacity and use of its services. My plea for the future is about how we will tackle the growth in the south-east. The reality is that Kent and south London are extremely important in providing a workforce in the City of London and Greater London. How can we deliver that and keep up with the demand?

The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) referred to the A2, which is another significant issue in my constituency. It is true that people are getting in their cars to come to London rather than using the trains. Frankly, my constituents deserve a hell of a lot more. I need to get to London on time, as do my constituents, but we also need to get home on time. I support what my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) said about the quality of people’s lives. People who work in London accept that they may be travelling for one or two hours to get to work, but they want to be able to get home, live their life, spend time with their children and do things other than work. Unfortunately, the service that Southeastern provides does not allow my constituents to have that extra time. I live only 26 miles from London and people further down the line in Kent will be experiencing even more challenging limits on their time.

I welcome this debate and want to hear from the Minister what plans there are for coping with demand and the increasing need for more capacity and longer trains. We want to know whether Southeastern will get its act together once and for all, so that we have a better spring and summer on the train service.

Several Hon. Members rose—

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. Clive Efford is forgoing his wind-up, so the Front-Bench winding-up speeches will start at 10.40. Two Members are trying to catch my eye, and perhaps they will divide the time between themselves.

10.28 am

Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a delight to serve under your sagacious direction, Mr Evans. I start with an apology for having to leave before the end of the debate because I have an appointment later this morning at King’s College hospital and it has already been postponed twice. You will understand. Mr Evans, that when one gets to my stage in life, one does not take liberties with one's cardiologist. I look forward to reading what the Minister says and I congratulate her on taking the problems not just of Southeastern, but of Southern and the whole debacle of the London Bridge redevelopment seriously for quite a time.

In my constituency there are seven stations served by Southeastern, and a further six on the borders are used by large numbers of my constituents—all the stations are in zone 4—so it is obvious how critical the Southeastern service is to the life of my community, not just economically but socially. The cost of an annual rail ticket between Penge East and Victoria starts at £1,280, and a zones 1 to 4 annual travelcard costs £1,860. Southeastern even has the effrontery to offer a first-class season ticket between Penge East and Victoria for a staggering £1,920. That is spoiled only by the fact that none of the trains that run between Penge East and Victoria actually has first-class carriages. The ever-increasing cost of rail tickets is a different debate entirely, but it is surely not unreasonable for the constituencies of all hon. Members present—I join in the general wailing and gnashing of teeth about the service provided by Southeastern—to expect a reasonable service, particularly in light of the amount of money that they pay.

I wish that Southeastern would put as much effort into running the trains on time as it does into providing excuses for why it does not. I complained on behalf of a constituent about the service from Charing Cross to Hayes and received the following reply:

“The causes have been primarily infrastructure-related, i.e. track, signal, and power supply failure, fatalities” —

I personally would not call that infrastructure—

“the collapse of the Dover Sea Wall”—

other hon. Members have mentioned that—

“landslips on the Bexleyheath and Hastings lines, fatalities at Hildenborough and Dover”—

I think those were probably passengers who gave up waiting for a train—

—a broken rail in the Crayford area and only this morning, a track…failure at Gravesend. While these may seem unrelated to the Hayes line the complexity of our network means that disruption on one line has a knock on impact on another.”

Well, I would have great difficulty explaining to people at Kent House and in Sydenham and Penge why the collapse of the Dover sea wall means that they cannot get into London. That is just ludicrous.

Recently, Southeastern even blamed service delays on “strong sunshine”—my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) has already mentioned this—making it difficult for drivers to read signals. Of course, the rail industry once came up with the wrong kind of snow; now, the wrong kind of sunshine affects people’s service. It is, as many other hon. Members have said, a scandalous position.

I could quote at length what other constituents have said, because I get complaints about the service three or four times a week, if not every day. One constituent said:

“I genuinely cannot remember the last time the trains were running even remotely close to the timetable. This is hugely frustrating when juggling commuting and childcare commitments. It is not fair on my employer that my time of arrival at work is largely in the lap of the gods and not fair on my son when I have to work late to make up for my late arrival.

As you are aware, it is an expensive business commuting into London and it is absolutely unacceptable to receive such a shoddy service at such a high price.”

And so nearly all the constituents who have contacted me on this matter. Another said:

“I board at Kent House on the 8.59 or 9.14 trains most working days and the trains have been late by 5-15 minutes every day this year, and some are cancelled on a semi-regular basis. As the services are costing more and more every year, the level of service…is not adequate.”
Indeed, it is going backwards. That is the experience of my constituents and those of most other hon. Members who have spoken. It is completely intolerable. As others have said, if Southeastern cannot run the trains, it should hand the franchise over to someone who can.

10.33 am

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) for securing this very important debate. This is the first time that I have spoken in a Westminster Hall debate, and my reasons for speaking in this one will not surprise anyone. Lewisham, one of the stations that has been mentioned quite a lot during the debate, is in my constituency and I am bombarded by constituents contacting me because of the numerous problems that many hon. Members have mentioned.

I intended to start by shining a light on some of Southeastern’s recent performance issues, but the problem with shining any light on Southeastern is that that is one of the excuses that is quite often used by the company. It has said that congestion in Lewisham is down to strong sunlight, so along with snowy days, wet days and windy days, Southeastern apparently cannot function on sunny days. As well as the poor performance that everyone has mentioned, it has poor excuses.

I have spoken to hundreds of people about their dissatisfaction with the state of the trains in south-east London. In my constituency, Southeastern operates six of the 10 stations. I will outline some of the concerns expressed to me. Oliver wrote to me in January, telling me that each time he used Southeastern trains in a two-week period he experienced monumental delays and cancellations, and often no explanation was given at all. Of course, there is a complaints procedure, but when my constituent Jos attempted to complain twice, after being dropped off in the middle of the night at a platform that she did not recognise because Southeastern had failed to announce that the train was no longer scheduled to arrive at her station, she received no response. One constituent even told me that she had considered moving because she was so miserable with the state of travel in Lewisham, Deptford.

I could go on—we all receive hundreds of emails and Twitter messages, and people come and speak to us every time we travel to work, about the poor customer service— but I will not. What I will say is that the current franchise is two trains earlier than one that should get them to their destination on time just to ensure they reach their appointment. One of the excuses that is quite often used by the company is that congestion in Lewisham is down to strong sunlight, so along with snowy days, wet days and windy days, Southeastern apparently cannot function on sunny days. As well as the poor performance that everyone has mentioned, it has poor excuses.

Last month, Lewisham, Deptford welcomed the news that Transport for London will be taking over Southeastern routes and stations throughout south-east London in 2018. That is a great start, but as many hon. Members have said, if Southeastern cannot run the service properly now, perhaps it should lose the franchise sooner.

10.37 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) not just on initiating the debate, but on the way he—and other hon. Members—brought to life the daily frustrations of travelling life. We all recognise the frustrations that hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber have expressed. I can vividly see passengers jamming their feet in doors in protest and frustration; I see that on my own train line. It should not have to be that way. And we can all recognise the collective groan when an aged train that should be 12 carriages long and turns out to be four carriages long comes into the station. We have heard from everyone who has spoken about some of the problems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham, very sensibly, pointed to the Which? passenger survey. He is right to say that it gives an accurate representation of where we are with Southeastern trains. Of course, he and many other hon. Members raised the issue of compensation. The Minister has spoken about that in the past, and I am sure she will say more about it this morning, but it is clear that it does not work for most people and needs to be strengthened. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham also made a very important point about the decline in reliability since Christmas. Again, that point was echoed by many other hon. Members.

I also recognised very much the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). He talked about overcrowding, reliability and some of the communication issues. Again, those points were echoed by other hon. Members. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to some of the user groups, which play such an important role on all our lines. Those people bear away, amusing the information that we need to hold these companies to account.

Another important point that he and other hon. Members made is that there is a real sense that passengers have lost confidence in the company, which raises some important questions about what happens next.

I thank the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), who is not here now, for uniting the Chamber in a vote of dissatisfaction with the current services. There are things on which we disagree, but I suspect we all agree on this.

My hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) painted a vivid picture. A number of us probably get up earlier than we needed to this morning in order to get the train to arrive here on time. It should not be that way. People should not have to get a train that is two trains earlier than one that should get them to their destination on time just to ensure they reach their appointment. She eloquently outlined people’s frustrations.

The hon. Members for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) raised important points about the challenges ahead in a growth region. This is not just about getting the problem sorted out for now, but about how we face the challenges of the future.

My hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) and for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) eloquently detailed some of the complaints and problems with which we are all familiar.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham made some opening points about customer satisfaction, which dropped dramatically for the Southeastern franchise from 83% in autumn 2011 to 75% in autumn 2015. A quarter of Southeastern’s passengers are dissatisfied with the level
of service provision. Among commuters, that statistic is even starker, with satisfaction plummeting from 77% to just 68%.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge mentioned some of the excuses that are proffered. Well, sometimes Southeastern’s public relations department is even more bizarre. Some hon. Members may remember an article in Metro, in which one of Southeastern’s people said that the real problem was that people did not really want to go to work or pay their fares in the first place, and that people were grumpy because the service “takes people somewhere they don’t want to be with money they don’t want to pay.”

That is not great, is it? Southeastern went even further, claiming that if the surveys had been carried out on a “sunny summer’s day”, the satisfaction ratings would be better because passengers would be more “upbeat”. From what we have heard this morning, passengers would need to be very upbeat to ignore some of the crammed compartments and torn up timetables.

Although it is a pretty tough job spinning for Southeastern, let us look at the collection of companies. All the franchises are part of Gova and therefore part of Go-Ahead, which reported that profits in its rail business had shot up by 30.5% to £25.7 million in the year to June. That is astonishing considering what we have heard today. The operator is reporting rocketing profits and is managing to hand out some pretty big bonuses at a time when services are declining. Rising profits should mean rising service standards, not appalling delays, overcrowding and severe disruption. Punctuality was only 87.7% over the past year, with 37% of those delays attributable to Southeastern, not Network Rail. The failures come despite Southeastern receiving £32.5 million in subsidy last year.

We have heard about some other problems, including the Dover sea wall and the landslips to which my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham made reference. I would welcome information from the Minister about whether any warnings have been raised with Network Rail about the condition of the areas in both cases and an update on the progress Network Rail has made in compiling its long-awaited register of the condition of its assets.

The Department for Transport gave the incumbent operator of the Southeastern franchise a four-year contract extension without running a wider tendering competition. The franchise began in April 2006 and was due to end in October 2014, but the Government gave the operator a direct award to continue running the service until June 2018.

Matthew Pennycook: The Government not only re-awarded the contract, but gave an additional £70 million to Southeastern to improve performance standards. All the promises and commitments that came with that have not materialised, as far as I am aware.

Daniel Zeichner: That is a very good point, to which I am just coming. The extension until June 2018 was awarded even though Southeastern had some of the lowest passenger satisfaction scores in the country and even though the Minister knew that passengers on the routes had not always received the service they deserve. The Government essentially gave Go-Ahead the go-ahead for four more years of misery for passengers. The direct award was nothing more than a reward for failure.

At the time, the Minister assured us: “We have also totally changed the contract terms to make sure they deliver on their promises.” Has Southeastern delivered on its promises? Looking at the most recent passenger satisfaction survey, it seems that the answer is no, and I think, having listened to their comments, that hon. Members would rather agree with that.

We have heard quite a bit about the length of trains. My own experience is with the Cambridge line, on which, under the Labour Government, trains were extended from eight to 12 carriages, which made a huge difference. When it happens, it really does help. Again, I will quote the Minister, who said just over a month ago:

“I am determined to review the business case for running the additional, bigger 12-car trains on the metro service in particular. I give the House an undertaking that there will be a decision on that in the next couple of months.”—[Official Report, 28 January 2016: Vol. 605, c. 523.]

I would be grateful if the Minister would let us know whether that decision has been reached and, if so, what decision has been made.

Another question that hon. Members raised is what will happen when the extended franchise comes to an end in June 2018. In January this year, the Government and the Mayor of London announced that they would consult on transferring London’s suburban rail services to Transport for London, which many hon. Members have welcomed this morning. Devolving routes in some areas of the capital has been transformative; indeed, significant investment is going into recently devolved routes to Enfield town, Chingford and Cheshunt.

We would welcome the devolution of control to ensure that passengers are put before profits, so that they get the level of service they desperately need and deserve. However, despite the headlines, that devolution is still a mere proposal. There has been no firm commitment from the Department. In 2012, the current Mayor of London attempted to get Southeastern services devolved and he failed. Despite what Government Members might say, there is no reason to believe that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) would enjoy any more success if he were successful in his mayoral campaign. The devolution of control might well be a calculated pre-mayoral election announcement, unaccompanied by any meaningful action to improve commuters’ journeys. It would be helpful if the Minister provided further information about the consultation and her Department’s consideration of the proposals.

Finally, with the Shaw report published later this month, it seems worth asking the Minister whether she really believes, after the disastrous precedent set by Railtrack, that breaking up and privatising Network Rail would improve services for passengers. Do we really want to return to the dark days of Railtrack? Passengers on Southeastern trains deserve better.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am sorry that I have not been left with an enormous amount of time. I will endeavour to answer all the questions raised, but if I do not get to them, I promise that I will write to hon. Members.
I congratulate the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) on securing the debate. He is an assiduous campaigner for better rail services, and we work best on this when we work together. Many right hon. and hon. Members have attended and spoken, including the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Mr Evennett) and the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), both of whom were rendered mute by high office, but made a point of coming.

I want to step through a couple of the tactical questions and then go through some of the broader issues. The landslip and Southeastern’s response to it was mentioned several times. Heavy and persistent rainfall closed the Bexleyheath line between 12 and 15 January. A recovery plan was put in place by Southeastern and Network Rail. My officials stayed in close contact with the operator and Network Rail to ensure that those actions were carried out. I was disappointed to hear today some examples of partially-sighted passengers and others not given the care and support they needed. There was a plan to offer taxis to passengers. I will certainly ensure that the company receives those comments and responds to them.

Dover sea wall was mentioned. Of course, major issues happen. I have been asked whether Network Rail’s surveying and early warning system is adequate for those sorts of events. I went to see the Lamington viaduct, which washed out and broke the west coast main line for a period of weeks. I am assured that the surveying programme is proactive, comprehensive and appropriate. Extreme weather events are clearly becoming even more common, and there is an important question to be asked, in particular about the level of funding that is baked into the current period—which, again, I am assured is appropriate. I do not have an answer on whether early warnings were received, but I will ask and respond to the hon. Member for Eltham on that point.

The reason why we are all here is that, despite such one-off events, performance on these services is not where it should be, nor where I want it to be, nor where the operator wants it to be, and certainly not where anyone in this room, or the customers they represent, wants it to be. I would gently point out that if Members look at the overall performance schedule, it has dropped from 91% of trains arriving on time last January, according to the public performance measure—I want to say a word about that, because I think the hon. Gentleman and I agree on whether it is adequate—to 88.3%, which means that almost nine out of 10 trains are getting to their destination on time. It is important to bear in mind that sometimes the vociferous complaints that we hear are a response because a particular line runs very ineffectively, which is important, or because there are certain passengers who are just extremely unhappy and now have the ability to let us know.

As hon. Members know, after the election I set up the south-east quadrant taskforce, which brought together, for the first time, Network Rail, Govia Thameslink Railway, Southeastern, Transport Focus and my officials. I continue to chair that group, and the next meeting is tomorrow. The group is an attempt to sweep away all this blame game and accounting for who is wrong. Our constituents do not care who is responsible for a delay; they just want to make sure that they are going to get to work, or home to pick up their kids from day care, on time. It is complete nonsense that for generations that was not the case. By the way, this has nothing to do with who owns the railway: it has always been the case that the railway has argued among itself about whether the engineers or the passenger-facing bits are correct. Frankly, I am sick to death of that conversation. If there is a problem, I want all aspects of the industry to work together to sort it out, which is very much the message that we give through the taskforce. Indeed, things are starting to improve, which I will mention.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) mentioned suicides. Let us not trivialise that. Somebody takes their life every 30 hours on the railways. It is a tragedy, it causes disruption to millions of people and it is absolutely ghastly for the train staff and train drivers. It is something that we must work to solve.

The taskforce is determined to sort out performance. I send a message to the industry that public performance measures, or right-time measures, that ignore the number of people whose lives are affected by disruption are irrelevant. There is no point comparing the PPM on a very lightly used franchise—say, the one north of the border—with the PPM on franchises running around London and the south-east. We are talking about the busiest parts of the railway. Tens of millions of people are travelling every year, and a delay for one train on those lines creates misery for millions, which is why I am working with the industry to try to ensure that these measures that we all like to throw about actually reflect the human experience of what is happening on the tracks.

We talk a lot about one of the fundamental causes of delay, which is the work at London Bridge. That is a real problem. It is a multi-million pound unpicking of a very tangled set of lines, some of which date back to the 1930s, and the rebuilding of what will be a fabulous station. That work is clearly putting immense pressure on the operators, and I am sympathetic. We are trying to encourage them to work much more closely with the Thameslink team to ensure that the works proceed without too much disruption. Let me flag for MPs in the room that, before the station opens, there will be a significant timetable rejigging for Southeastern customers in the summer. I want to ensure that everyone is aware and that that communication work goes out as effectively as possible.

My hon. Friends the Members for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) and for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) asked the important question of what “good” looks like once all this disruption works through the system. What is the level of performance at which we can hold up our hands and say that it is a high-performing railway? Many activities have already happened. New maintenance regimes have been put in place, and new bunches of relief drivers are stationed around the system to ensure that if a misplaced train arises, drivers can quickly get to it.

Right-time starts from stations and depots to ensure that trains leave on time are fundamental. A question has been raised several times about whether Southeastern is meeting its franchise commitments. When the franchise was originally let under the last Labour Government, and re-let under a direct award a couple of years ago, franchising tended to focus on processes and inputs. If an operator said, “Yes—tick—I have deep-cleaned my
stakeholders. Yes—tick—I have hired an additional number of drivers. Yes—tick—I have made sure that all my front-line staff have better information systems,” the Department, under all colours of Administration, would say that that franchise holder was doing its job. That is not good enough. Franchising should be about delivering outcomes, delivering performance and delivering customer satisfaction.

The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and I occasionally share a train ride, and it is much better than he likes to say, but there we are. The new franchise for the Greater Anglia area is focused on contractual outcomes on performance and customer satisfaction. It is not just, “Have you done the following things?” but “Have you actually delivered the results that we want you to deliver?”

The important issue of customer care and handling has been raised several times. Indeed, customer satisfaction is not quite at its bottom, but I admit that it is almost there, at 75%, which is actually the highest score in the last two years. The score for the autumn period is improving, but customer care on this franchise has to improve. Many right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out that there are still gaps. Staff have to be outward-looking, and they have to be thinking of people on the trains as customers who have a choice—they are not just units who need to be moved to and from their lives. Indeed, Southeastern is committed to pushing out more information to the frontline and upgrading customer information systems. All those obligations that were in the franchise agreement have been completed on or ahead of schedule.

Southeastern has also invested almost £5 million in improving stations. The scores on satisfaction with stations have gone up, which is important to see. Southeastern is liable under the terms of its franchise agreement if it does not meet its national rail passenger survey scores. At the moment, it is still meeting those scores, but it is liable for penalties if they should drop further. I also want to put into the mix the question of what we expect during major works, such as the London Bridge project. We will face that problem with HS2, and we have to make it absolutely clear what outcomes we expect from operators at those times of disruption.

I will not delight Members and say that we have made a decision on the rolling stock. I am bound and determined to get new rolling stock on the line by the end of this year. New rolling stock will add capacity, particularly on the very crowded metro lines. I do not need to bore Members with details about the departmental investment cases, but all of them are being worked through. As Members might imagine, I am pushing hard to ensure that I can make a positive announcement for capacity both later this year and again in 2018, because I understand the point and its relevance. I take the point raised by the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). We must make sure we know where we can use the trains effectively so that people can walk forward, with selective door-opening if necessary. [Interruption.] Oh dear: that’s thunder.

The other point that has been raised is about compensation. We have among the most generous compensation schemes in Europe. People travelling from the constituency of the hon. Member for Erith have a journey time of only 36 minutes to Victoria, so compensation is not particularly relevant because it kicks in at 30 minutes, which is not terribly helpful. It is a manifesto commitment of my Government, reiterated by the Chancellor, to introduce in a relatively short time—I certainly want to do it this year—a compensation commitment on which the clock starts ticking at 15 minutes. Several Members alluded to the c2c scheme, which is now providing compensation per minute of delay after the first two minutes. That is possible because of the Government’s investment in the south-east flexible ticketing programme. That is being rolled out to Southeastern, which will have the capability to offer compensation for these minutes of delay when it goes live on the SEFT system with smartcard season ticket holders by the end of the year.

Fare increases have been mentioned. I am proud to represent a Government who have capped fares at RPI plus 0% not just for this year but for the whole of this Parliament, which on average is worth more than £400 to every season ticket holder in the country.

I have very little time left. I will write, in particular on the point that the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) raised about changes to compensation, because I am not aware of that and I want to investigate. None of us is satisfied with the performance of the franchise. The question is whether anyone out there could run it better. My considered judgment is no. This is difficult, and there are huge engineering works taking place on the line. The company and Network Rail are absolutely committed to driving up performance, to the extent that Network Rail’s operating director is now devoting 40% of his time to sorting out the performance problems on these very congested lines.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Student Volunteering

11.1 am

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered student volunteering.

It is good to have you in charge of this debate, Mr Evans.

As last week was the 15th year of National Student Volunteering Week, I am taking the opportunity in this debate to celebrate student volunteering, to thank the many student volunteers in my constituency and to support action by universities and the Government to build on the enormous contribution that student volunteering makes. I thank both the network development director at Student Hubs, Francis Wright, and the public affairs officer at the National Union of Students, Alexander Lee, for their very helpful briefings.

The value of student volunteering does not often get the credit or attention that it deserves. I suppose that is because good news is never as newsworthy as bad news. So we can bet that any problems that workaround student behaviour causes will get a lot more attention than the many thousands of hours of voluntary commitment by students who are helping to make our communities better places.

In Oxford, our local community benefits from hundreds of dedicated student volunteers from Oxford and Oxford Brookes Universities, who give time every week to help meet a wide range of local needs. The local student hub currently supports over 30 student-led volunteering projects in Oxford that benefit local residents. There are 281 Schools Plus volunteers tutoring in 12 local primary and secondary schools across some 26 projects, helping pupil achievement in areas ranging from literacy to music to GCSE science. In many cases, of course, the student volunteers are only a few years older than those they are helping, and there is a particularly powerful mentoring effect when student volunteers who themselves come from disadvantaged backgrounds help to raise the aspirations and attainment of pupils in poorer communities. Another project, Branch Up, does that by running activity days for children referred by social services. It supports 30 young people, many of whom come from Oxford’s more deprived areas, through projects that tackle educational and extracurricular disadvantage.

Intergenerational support features too, through LinkAges, a student-led project that connects students with older people to tackle social isolation. LinkAges has a particularly strong relationship with Isis House, a care home in Florence Park, where around 20 volunteers help to run activity sessions and away-days. A number of LinkAges befrienders also support older people who live alone. And East Oxford Community Centre is home to Project Soup, a student-led initiative that runs micro-fundraising dinners for community projects by selling soup and bread that would otherwise have gone to waste. So far, over £1,800 has been raised there for local projects.

For a number of years, I have been in touch with KEEN—Kids Enjoy Exercise Now—which students from Oxford Brookes and Oxford Universities put on games and other activities for children and young people with special needs, providing real enjoyment for all participants and welcome respite for parents who know that their children are socialising and having fun with others of a similar age. I was privileged to present the medals at the KEEN Olympics sports day last summer, and to see so much joy on the faces of all those taking part was really heart-warming.

That project brings home an absolutely crucial aspect of student volunteering, namely that there is a huge three-way benefit. Of course, those being helped benefit from the activities that the students organise; the students themselves benefit enormously from the experience, in ways that will help their personal development and often their careers; and the local community and society gains from the social value and benefits of the voluntary activity.

I must also praise students’ voluntary political involvement. I go out nearly every Sunday morning, calling round the constituency, talking with residents and taking up their concerns, and listening to their views on politics and much else. Along with other local activists and councillors, in term-time I am always joined by students from Oxford University Labour Club or the Brookes Union Labour society. Getting up relatively early on a Sunday morning to help with community representation is not perhaps a stereotypical student activity, but the thousands of hours that those student volunteers have put in has enriched our politics locally, and I am sure the same is true of student volunteers for other political parties, those working on important campaigns such as the forthcoming referendum, and those involved in the enormous amount of work that goes into campaigning on issues such as equal rights, the environment and homelessness. Students care, and many of them channel that caring into purposeful action that makes a difference.

The experience of student volunteering that we are fortunate to benefit from in Oxford is replicated in various ways in every university and college. Across the country, there is many a food bank, many a faith group community initiative and many a charity that would founder without its student volunteers. As the NUS briefing for this debate points out, last week alone—the volunteering week—more than 16,000 students got involved in over 500 events across 125 colleges and universities. One way or another, more than 600,000 students will be involved in student societies, clubs and volunteering projects this year. That student contribution is a huge win-win resource for our society and merits support at every opportunity.

Student hubs provide invaluable facilities and networking. It must be more than 10 years ago now that those who came up with the student hubs idea—another Oxford first—were sitting in my advice surgery and explaining the difference that it could make in facilitating and expanding student volunteering, and how right they were. This is a success story, and one that commands support across the political spectrum. It is important that everything possible is done to sustain and build on that support.

I am timing my remarks to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) to speak on points coming out of the all-party group on students, but there are some points that I will highlight to the Minister and others.

The first is to stress what a resource student volunteering is for the role of universities and colleges in our communities. Every bit of investment that they can make in helping to provide student hubs, and in supporting funding and
Last Tuesday, to mark Student Volunteering Week we volunteered while they are at university and to the growing opportunities. Liam’s is a great good news story, and that students bring alongside traditional volunteering student volunteering, but the creativity and innovation that projects is very much part of that process. It is important that the Government do all they can to support volunteering, for example by the Cabinet Office and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills making it clear to universities that investing in the provision of high-quality social action opportunities for their students is something that is expected of them.

Within four years, 35% of university applicants will be National Citizen Service graduates, so we need to consider how NCS can help to build bridges to the universities that have invested in community volunteering, for example by showcasing the best examples of such volunteering to people who are thinking of applying to university. We need to create a culture in the UK where community service is valued—it is much more valued in the US—as an indicator of future leadership potential and is taken into account in evaluating applications to university. We also need to ensure, through the support of universities and student hubs for volunteering, that the benefits of volunteering do not disproportionately fall to those who are better off at university because their time is less constrained by the need to do part-time work. The benefits should be accessible and available for everyone. Student volunteering does so much for our society. Let us thank all the students and all those helping them who make that possible. Let us do everything we can together to make it an even greater success in the future, because everybody benefits.

11.10 am

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) for providing me with the opportunity to add to his comments. I echo them, because the landscape that he paints of volunteering opportunities and activity in Oxford is replicated in every town and city across the country that benefits from universities and colleges.

I speak as the Member with the highest number of students of any UK constituency. As of last week, I am also the representative of the student volunteer of the year, and I congratulate Liam Rodgers. He is a creative writing student at Sheffield Hallam University. He is the leader and founder of UpScribe, a project that helps homeless people to express themselves through creative writing, increasing their confidence and ability to work with others, as well as reintegrating them into society. That project not only demonstrates the breadth of student volunteering, but the creativity and innovation that students bring alongside traditional volunteering opportunities. Liam’s is a great good news story, and there are plenty like it across the country.

We should put on record our thanks, as my right hon. Friend has, to the almost one in three students who volunteer while they are at university and to the growing numbers in further education colleges who do so, too. Last Tuesday, to mark Student Volunteering Week we held a meeting of the all-party group on students, which I chair. That meeting was not only to celebrate that activity, but to look at the challenges.

As my right hon. Friend said, volunteering is a win-win. Local communities benefit hugely from the thousands of students involved in every town and city where they are engaged, and that is the main motivator for students. Four in five students responding to an NUS survey said that it was why they got involved in volunteering, but they also benefit, developing skills and improving their employability. We all know that in a competitive graduate market employers are increasingly looking for graduates-plus. Employers do not simply want a good degree, but experience and skills, too, and volunteering helps facilitate that. It is therefore doubly important that volunteering opportunities are available to everyone.

A joint report by Universities UK and the National Union of Students found that not having enough time is cited by students as the main reason why they are unable to volunteer or to volunteer as much as they would wish. The main pressure on time, apart from academic work, is paid employment. Research shows that 77% of students work to help fund their studies. The pressure to earn while studying is increasing with the cost of university. I worry that that pressure will increase further for the poorest students with the abolition of maintenance grants. If we limit volunteering to those who do not have to take paid employment to see themselves through university, we tilt the playing field—it is already tilted towards those with advantages—even further in their favour and in the wrong direction. We would be giving extra opportunities to those who already have an edge in the graduate market, while those from lower income families risk falling further behind. I am keen to get the Minister’s views on how we can ensure that volunteering opportunities are available to all, so that in future Student Volunteering Weeks we can celebrate moving from the basis of strength that we have now to having even more people engaged with an even greater impact on our communities.

11.15 am

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Rob Wilson): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I think for the first time. May I congratulate the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) on securing today’s debate? This is an important topic, as he laid out in his comments. I know what a strong advocate he is for student social action. In some ways, how could he be anything else, representing the constituency that he does? Also, many years ago he went to Reading School in my constituency. It is a top-performing academic school, but it is keen on the wider individual and ensuring that young people give something back to society for the great education they get at that school. I understand where his core values come from on this particular subject.

I am delighted to reiterate the Government’s commitment to encouraging young people to get involved in all forms of social action. I will take “student” in its wider context, and not just talk about university students, who we have heard a lot about in the comments so far. Youth social action is close to my heart, so I hope the Minister leading on this agenda for the Government. We want to see all young people having the opportunity to take part in social action and to go on to form what
should be a lifelong habit—it should not just be for a few years when they are young; the habit should be embedded so that all through their life they are always giving something back to their communities. One of the ways that we as the Government want to achieve that is through the National Citizen Service. More than 200,000 young people have taken part in NCS since 2011, and the NCS Trust estimates that graduates have delivered more than 8 million hours of volunteering time already. Consecutive independent evaluations demonstrate that NCS delivers more confident, capable and engaged young people, and it continues to represent impressive value for money.

I want to expand the opportunity to every young person who wants a place on an NCS scheme, making it a rite of passage that young people look forward to. In January, the Prime Minister set out his ambition that 60% of all 16-year-olds participate in NCS by 2021. To achieve that, we have committed more than £1 billion of funding over the next four years to grow the programme to 360,000 places by 2020. NCS will become the largest programme of its kind in Europe. I am particularly proud of that, and all the young people who have been and will be involved should be, too.

We have already seen NCS graduates go on to achieve great things in continuing their social action journey. One such NCS graduate is now part of the Points of Light team at the Cabinet Office. He works as part of a small team identifying outstanding volunteers right across the country to receive recognition directly from the Prime Minister for their work. NCS graduates from across the UK are celebrating all things social action this Saturday. It is a chance for them to showcase their social action activity and to promote the causes close to their hearts. NCS is all about giving young people the tools, opportunities and respect to achieve amazing things in their community, so the NCS social action day will be a fantastic way to do that.

NCS is not the limit of our ambition in government. We believe in creating a social action journey pre and post-NCS. We want to encourage all forms of youth social action, and the Government are committed to continuing our support of Step Up to Serve’s #iwill campaign. That campaign is supported by all parties in the House of Commons. It aims to increase the number of 10 to 20-year-olds taking part in youth social action by 50% by 2020, because we recognise the importance of their social action activity and to promote the causes close to their hearts. NCS is all about giving young people the tools, opportunities and respect to achieve amazing things in their community, so the NCS social action day will be a fantastic way to do that.

As part of the Government’s continued commitment to all forms of youth social action, the Cabinet Office has invested more than £1 million to grow youth social action opportunities across England, which has been generously matched by the Pears Foundation and the UK Community Foundations. The national fund is working with nine successful applicants to increase opportunities for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or rural areas. The local fund concentrates on optimising opportunities in Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridge; areas previously identified as having low youth social action participation rates.

We have also seen other fantastic results through funding social action. Through our unified youth social action fund, Youth United has created 20,000 new places for young people to join groups in disadvantaged communities across the UK, and 90% of the units created are still running with no further funding from Government, which is a great example of sustainability and a really fantastic result, so I congratulate Youth United on doing that.

Part of the fund is to support innovative approaches to reaching the most hard-to-reach young people in our communities. The Boys Brigade has struggled to recruit adult volunteers in some of its more rural locations owing to the timings of meetings, but what is so great about this story is how recruiting NCS graduates as volunteers is really showing how this very natural social action journey can fit together between NCS and other organisations. This part of the unified fund is also enabling the Scout Association to be more accessible to young people with disabilities; the Woodcraft Folk to meet refugees and other young people with English as a second language; and the Volunteer Police Cadets to run a pilot programme working with young offenders.

Reports will be published later this year in relation to the fund, and I am sure everyone here will agree that this will be an exciting piece of research that we can learn from. It really shows the diverse range of social action projects that young people get involved in, and the Government are committed to supporting that journey.

Mr Andrew Smith: I agree with what the Minister is saying in this happily consensual debate. Has he had or will he have discussions with the Minister for Universities and Science, his hon. Friend the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), as well. We want to ensure that we have joined-up Government and that the social action journey continues through life and gives every young person the opportunity to take part in things that they want to do in their local community. I have seen at first hand the great work being done by young volunteers in a variety of sectors and communities. I was particularly impressed to see the huge contribution that young people can make in the health and social care sector, for example. I visited the Royal Free young volunteers programme, where young volunteers supported patients, staff and visitors primarily in two roles: as satellite navigation guides around the hospital and as mealtime experience volunteers. The young people I spoke to aspired to have a wide impact in society, beyond the hospital, to improve positive engagement throughout their communities. It was clear to see that those volunteers brought energy, enthusiasm and heart to everybody they interacted with.

The latest youth social action survey demonstrated that 42% of young people between the age of 10 and 20 years old have participated in meaningful social action in the past year. This demonstrates that young
people have a real appetite to play their part. In January this year we published the outcome of a highly significant new study conducted by the behavioural insights team, which demonstrated a link between social action and improved educational attainment as well as enhanced employability skills, which is something that the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) mentioned in his comments. The study indicated that people who engaged in volunteering were up to three times more likely to get invited for a job interview than people who did not volunteer.

The Government are committed to supporting young people, giving them the power and opportunity to play a real part in their community and to build important skills for life. I am keen that the habit remains through adult life. The Government also support young people to have a say in the community and voice their opinions on issues that are important to them. Some of this work is delivered through a grant to the British Youth Council for youth voice activities. Last year, as I am sure hon. Members are aware, the BYC's Make Your Mark ballot, the largest annual ballot of young people's views, culminated in a record-breaking 970,000 votes cast towards key topics for young people to focus on. That is a remarkable achievement that would not have been possible without all those young people actively getting involved. That sum of nearly 1 million votes means that 16.5% of the nation's 11 to 18-year-olds had their say. That is a great demonstration of young people's interest, and a great vehicle for the collective voice of young people to be heard.

It is therefore even more important that we listen to the voice of young people who can bring a fresh perspective and innovative ideas to many of the challenges that we face. At the annual sitting of BYC's Youth Parliament in November, I was impressed by the level of commitment and enthusiasm shown by the members of the Youth Parliament who want to make a positive change in society. It was truly impressive to watch young people debating important issues such as mental health and the living wage. Colleagues in Parliament have frequently expressed support for the UK Youth Parliament. As hon. Members may be aware, in June 2015 Parliament resolved that the UKYP should continue to use the House of Commons Chamber for its annual debate for the remainder of the current parliamentary term until 2020. In light of that, I decided to offer BYC a grant agreement to support it to deliver its youth voice activities for the remainder of the Parliament.

Last week we celebrated, as the right hon. Member for Oxford East said, the 15th anniversary of Student Volunteering Week. Delivered in partnership between student hubs, the National Union of Students and the student volunteering network, the week is used to discuss the challenges and opportunities in student volunteering. I had the pleasure of being involved in the celebration event where Liam Rodgers, a constituent of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, was presented with the student volunteer of the year award. As the hon. Gentleman said, Liam founded UpScribe, a writing project for homeless people to express themselves through creative writing. Liam led on the creation and publication of a book created by people who participated in the project, many of whom are now published writers. It was impressive to hear that Liam had donated a third of his £1,000 award to a fellow shortlisted student of the year volunteer. This demonstrated his commitment to the widest elements of youth social action.

During Student Volunteering Week, I also visited one of the successful organisations under the national youth social action fund. Through the fund, an organisation called Whole Education plans to use its network of schools across the country to work with students who implement their own community projects and embed the culture of social action in their schools. I spent time with a small group of young volunteers who were developing an online platform for students to share their youth-led social action ideas, as well as designing a virtual social action badge, which I look forward to seeing later this week. I want to encourage more universities to harness the power and positive outcomes of student volunteering. I am keen to explore how to engage more vice-chancellors to support the growth of student volunteering, and I will speak to my colleague in higher education to see how we can do that. There is a great deal to do if we are to make social action a part of life for 10 to 20-year-olds under this Government, but I am firmly committed to making that a reality.

I will end by thanking all the individuals and organisations that support youth social action for their commitment and dedication. I also extend my thanks again to the right hon. Member for Oxford East for initiating this debate today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
Egypt: British Support

[MARK PRITCHARD IN THE CHAIR]

2.30 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered British support for stability in Egypt.

It is a great honour to introduce this debate. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I visited Egypt many times before I came to this place: I went there as a student and in 2008 I spent a month in Cairo trying to learn Arabic—very unsuccessfully, I should add. I have also had the honour of visiting Egypt many times on parliamentary delegations with the Conservative Middle East Council and others.

This is a timely and important debate, for a number of reasons. First, we need only open the newspaper every day or look online to see the absolute turmoil that much of the region has plunged into. I am also conscious of the fact that a lot of the turmoil and confusion that has crept into our world has emerged very recently. I recall travelling to Egypt for the first time in 1998. There had been a terrorist outrage in Luxor in 1997, a terrible incident in which dozens of people were killed, but when I visited—obviously this was all before 9/11—there was a real optimism about the place. It was a broadly secular country: people could walk freely, there was no alcohol and alcohol was served freely. It was a country looking towards a bright future.

It is not my place to go through the recent history of the region today, but as a consequence of what has happened there in the past 15 years since the events of 9/11, and everything that has been going on since the Arab spring, the need for stability in Egypt and its role in the world have increased. The mood there has been a lot more pessimistic, and its people and Government have gone through a very difficult past five years.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. The Egyptian people and nation are central to the middle east. Does he agree that it is crucial for the future wellbeing of the middle east and the wider region that Egypt restores itself to a position of centrality and stability in order to spread that across the region?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman has highlighted very pithily—more pithily than I did—the key fact that Egypt is absolutely central to the Arab world. We need only look at the numbers: something like 90 million people—well over a third of the Arabic-speaking people across the globe—live in Egypt. In Al-Azhar University, Egypt has one of the key centres of Islamic scholarship and learning. Egyptian media dominate the Arabic-speaking world. The Egyptian Arabic dialect is widely understood across the Arab world.

Egypt is also important for historic reasons. In the 20th century we need only look at the careers of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. These were huge figures in the Arab world who played a role in securing stability in this important region. As the hon. Gentleman said, Egypt is therefore absolutely central to any form of stability or solution to the ongoing problems in the middle east.

I called for this debate because we need to recognise, in this Parliament, throughout the country and throughout the international community, that stability in Egypt is crucial and we should all be investing heavily in it.

Although Egypt has attained a modicum of stability, people will recognise that the degree of stability that has been reached is not complete. There are still dangers. We saw an appalling terrorist outrage in November, when a Russian civilian aircraft was blown up in the sky with huge loss of life. There are threats still lurking in the Egyptian scene. Although there is a terrorist threat, it must be admitted that the Egyptian Government have taken some very severe steps. As friends of Egypt—as people who are interested, in every sense of the word, in maintaining stability in and supporting Egypt—it is our job to ask probing questions about its Government’s treatment of political prisoners and people who have expressed doubts about or even opposition to the regime. It is our job to ensure that the Egyptian Government are held to the highest standards with respect to human rights and individual freedoms. I do not deny that at all.

Many people in Britain view some developments in Egypt with considerable concern. I need only mention the Italian University of Cambridge PhD student who was found killed, clearly murdered, in Cairo six weeks ago. We do not know what happened and we have not heard any definitive answers from the regime. The Egyptian Government cannot simply be given a blank cheque by their friends and allies in the west. I regard myself as a friend of Egypt—broadly speaking. Britain and the British Government are friends of Egypt—but being a friend does not mean that we blindly accept everything that the Egyptian Government do, nor does it mean that we should acquiesce or turn a blind eye to the outrages or abuses we have identified.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Recently, I was delighted to be able to join my hon. Friend, and other Members present, on an extremely informative visit to Cairo. He is making an important point about how the Egyptian Government operate, which is of concern to our constituents. Nevertheless, does he agree that for the Egyptian people—indeed, for the whole region—there is one thing of huge importance that probably dwarfs everything else: stability? He mentioned that Egypt is a very large country, with a population of 90 million. It has a huge history, unlike many other Arab countries. It has a big contribution to make, so stability will be an important factor, and we should be supporting the Egyptian Government in that pursuit.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. At the centre of this issue is the fact that we have to deal with a very fine balancing act in Egypt, which is why this debate is so important. On the one hand, we have a fragile situation in the region and a country that has gone through enormous economic pressure and two destabilising revolutions in four years. On the other hand, it is a country that is crucial to the stability of the region. There is the need for order and stability, but there is also a Government who have a mixed record, if I can put it that way, on guaranteeing human rights and the pressure and force they have applied in domestic situations.

We in Parliament have to appreciate that very fine balance, because frankly we do not understand the immense pressures that the Egyptian people have gone through. One startling fact is that in 1952 the population
of Egypt was 20 million. I have spoken to Cairenes who remember those times, and they remember a completely different Egypt. Cities such as Cairo and Alexandria were much smaller, yet much more spacious. In many ways they were much more luxurious than they are today. Over the past 60 years, the Egyptian population has more than quadrupled. That demographic pressure constitutes Egypt’s greatest challenge.

As can be imagined, in a country where more than 50% of people are under the age of 25, there needs to be employment, a degree of economic progress and a Government who recognise the ambitions and aspirations of their young people. In that context, government can be very difficult. Against that backdrop of a growing population and economic pressure, there is also the rise of, for want of a better phrase, political Islam and the complications that radical Islamic thinking—takfiri thinking, as it is called—bring to the political mix.

While I am talking about the demographics in Egypt, we also should remember that there are nearly 10 million Copts—Egyptian Christians who have been there for 2,000 years, since the birth of Christianity—who comprise something like 10% of Egypt’s population. They will point out that they have been there for longer than Islam has existed as a religion, so they have a deep historic connection to and experience of the country of their forefathers.

I have had the privilege of visiting Egypt a number of times in the last six years. In that time, I have seen four or five different Heads of State and three different Governments, and I have had the privilege of speaking to several Ministers. In the brief period after the Muslim Brotherhood took over and were running the country, it was clear to me there was huge pressure on the Copts. Churches were being burned and Coptic people were being attacked. No community breathed a greater sigh of relief when the Muslim Brotherhood was removed, as it were, from government than the Copts. No group of people was happier to see a restoration, as they would see it, of some kind of order under the form of General Sisi.

For us in the west looking at that development, we can quibble about the details and say that, like Mubarak, Sisi is some kind of military dictator, but that is to overlook a lot of the changes that have happened in Egypt. We had the privilege of meeting Egyptian parliamentarians, who treated us and hosted us incredibly generously and respectfully in their Parliament. They were very keen to adopt the best parliamentary practices from Britain and apply them to their new Parliament, which met less than two months ago. They are absolutely committed to building a form of parliamentary democracy. That process might take a long time. Egypt’s parliamentary democracy is certainly not perfectly formed, but few parliamentary democracies can claim to be perfect and fully formed. We have just been considering how the House of Lords operates in our country. Parliament has existed for hundreds and hundreds of years, yet we are still evolving and trying to look at the nature of the two Houses and how they co-ordinate with each other.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, although Egypt has had its unique problems since the Arab spring—or the Arab winter, as it is called in some quarters—the fact that the Egyptian Government are forcefully putting forward a democratic mandate is a good thing for the region?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I think my hon. Friend is right. People will dispute the extent to which Egypt is a full, participatory democracy—people can have different views—but it is clearly going in the right direction. We can discuss where along the road we think it is, but the movement is positive. Many of the elections that were held in Mubarak’s time were far more tightly controlled than the parliamentary election we have just witnessed in Egypt. The nature of political life in Egypt is evolving. That goes to the core of what I am saying. Stability—some degree of law and order in the streets—is absolutely essential. Anecdotally, we were told that at the time of the Muslim Brotherhood there was practically a self-imposed curfew in Cairo. Now people are beginning to go out—they feel a bit more secure and safer—and a civic society is growing.

I have talked briefly about political developments and aspirations, about structures and about Parliaments, but we need to think about a basic economic question, which I alluded to when I was talking about the population increase. Demographic pressures and the economy are absolutely crucial. Anyone who knows anything about Egypt will know that, broadly, about 20% of its economy is based on tourism. One thing that we can do directly to help Egypt to build up its economy is to help tourism. Our delegation learned that the suspension of British flights to Sharm el-Sheikh was a matter of grave concern to Egyptian businessmen and the Egyptian Government. I recommend that the Government look seriously at that—I know we are doing that and are inching towards lifting the ban and stopping the suspension of flights. If that were to happen, sooner rather than later, it would be an immense boon to Egyptian tourism and its economy.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I apologise for intervening again—I am not seeking to catch your eye, Mr Pritchard, as I have to entertain 101 Logistic Brigade from Aldershot shortly, so I will not be able to make a speech—but I want to pick up on this important point my hon. Friend has made. Does he agree that the British Government have moved heaven and earth to do whatever they can to ensure that we can resume flights to Sharm el-Sheikh, and that the Egyptians have come a long way towards meeting the British authorities’ safety requirements? It is imperative that both sides work even harder so we can resume flights in time for the summer season.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Something like 1 million British tourists go to Egypt every year, under normal circumstances. We have tried extremely hard to help in that regard—I know that my hon. Friend the Minister and others have spoken eloquently and tried hard behind the scenes—but this is a matter of critical importance. Egypt has a deficit of something like 10% or 12% of GDP, which is very high. It has a very high unemployment rate—it is something like 12%—and the demographic pressures that I have talked about are not getting any easier. The economy is critical to the stability of Egypt and the wider region. That is something that we can do directly to help Egypt.

I would not want to anticipate or prejudge any of the security considerations, because they are obviously paramount, but I want to put on the table the fact that
directly supporting Egyptian tourism will have a knock-on effect. It will help the Egyptian economy and provide employment. That in itself will defuse a lot of the tension, militate against the attractions of extremism and prevent young people from going down that route.

In conclusion, I think we have a good and helpful relationship with Egypt. I would not want to inflate his ego too much, but we have a Minister responsible for the region who has a deep knowledge of and commitment to, not only Egypt, but other countries in the middle east—I know, because I have travelled with him. Broadly, our relationship with the Egyptian Government is very strong. I would suggest that we closely consider the issue of flights. Economic support will obviously be important in years to come. Lastly, while we have done many good things and built up a good relationship, there is some way to go. This is an evolving relationship and there will be challenges ahead, but I hope that in those challenges Egypt can find a solid and steadfast friend in Britain, the British Government and our people.

2.50 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for securing this debate. Instability in Egypt and across many areas in the middle east is a grave concern. It is one of the major global challenges faced by this generation, and such is the intricacy of the challenge that one fears that it may well be faced by generations to come as well. I am here because I and my constituents in Cambridge care deeply about the human rights abuses and political volatility that the people of Egypt are facing. I am also here because I want to tell the House about Giulio Regeni, whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned and whose appalling murder has drawn international condemnation.

Giulio was a 28-year-old Italian PhD student at Girton College in the University of Cambridge. He spoke five languages—Italian, English, Spanish, Arabic, and German—and was researching labour unrest and independent trade unions as a visiting scholar at the American University in Cairo. He went missing on 25 January, which was the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the 2011 uprising against former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. He was on his way to meet a friend at a restaurant near Tahrir Square—known, of course, as the symbolic centre of the Egyptian revolution—but nine days later his body was found in a ditch after being subjected to such sadism, but I hope that in those challenges Egypt can find a solid and steadfast friend in Britain, the British Government and our people.

Giulio’s family and friends need answers. Italy wants answers. I suggest that we all need answers, not only because this case was brutal and because it was the first case that we know about of a foreign academic researcher working in Cairo being subjected to such sadism, but because it was not an isolated incident for the people of Egypt. According to human rights organisations, the torture that it appears Giulio suffered is a matter of routine for those imprisoned by state security organisations in Egypt. According to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, Egyptian citizens are seeing “repression on a scale unprecedented in Egypt’s modern history”. According to the Al-Nadeem Centre for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, almost 500 people have died at the hands of Egypt’s security forces and over 600 people were tortured while in detention in 2015. According to The Guardian, hundreds of Egyptians are being “disappeared”, tortured and held outside of judicial oversight.

What can one do against such brutal barbarism? Why on earth did this happen to Giulio? Some have speculated that the politically sensitive research that he was undertaking on labour unions in Egypt was a factor, or perhaps his extracurricular journalism for the manifesto communist newspaper in Italy meant he was targeted. We do not know, but that there are countries in this world where people are imprisoned, tortured, or murdered for their academic pursuits, their writing, or their political views is the sad truth.

We recognise that the situation in Egypt is complex and challenging, and like my hon. Friends I desperately want to see the region underpinned by stability and democracy. I hope the Minister will enlighten us about recent representations that the Government have made to the Egyptian Government regarding human rights issues. In a written answer on 11 February, the Government said:

“We are aware of the tragic death of Mr Regeni, an Italian national, following his disappearance on 25 January and pass our condolences to his friends and family at this difficult time. We support Italian and Egyptian efforts to investigate into the circumstances of his death.”

I would welcome some clarification of what can only be described as “diplomatic language”. In what way are the British Government supporting the Italian and Egyptian investigative efforts?

I conclude by quoting from the letter signed by more than 4,600 academics from around the globe. They wrote of Giulio:

“Our community has been enriched by his presence. We are diminished by the loss of a young researcher whose work tackled questions that are vitally important to our understanding of contemporary Egyptian society.

They continued:

“We…call on the Egyptian authorities to cooperate with an independent and impartial investigation into all instances of forced disappearances, cases of torture and deaths in detention during January and February this year, alongside investigations by criminal prosecutors into Giulio’s death, in order that those responsible for these crimes can be identified and brought to justice.”

2.55 pm

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I refer right hon. and hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.
I too have been able to visit Egypt to inform myself about what has been and is now going on. I associate myself with and echo the concerns hon. Members have expressed about the tragic fate of Giulio Regeni and other human rights abuses, which I will discuss further later in my speech. Recent events in Egypt have fundamentally disturbed us and have challenged us to think about the dynamics underlying the Arab spring, posing basic questions to western politicians which have been played out in Egypt on a global stage. In many ways, events in Egypt fundamentally challenge our sometimes lazy notions of democracy and challenge us to consider the realities of the balance and tensions between freedoms and the merits of stability.

We should not underestimate the uniqueness of Egypt’s position. Look at its neighbours, which also experienced the Arab spring tidal wave in 2011. In Syria, horrific, blood-stained chaos is sucking the diabolical death culture of Daesh. It is a humanitarian catastrophe and a centre of global tensions, the effects of which include not only untold numbers of inhumane acts of cruelty against individuals, children, and homosexuals, but the destabilisation of the whole of Europe. Look at Yemen, sunk beneath a flood of war, and Iraq, struggling against the onslaught of Daesh. Libya is now a failed state and an arena of warring militias and jihadists. These are Egypt’s neighbours and it is important to consider Egypt’s actions and challenges in that context.

By contrast, look at Egypt. There was an uprising in 2011 and Mubarak was removed in February. In June 2012, Egypt held elections and Morsi was elected, but then the direction that Morsi began taking dramatically alarmed the country, including many of those who had thought that the Muslim Brotherhood would prove genuinely moderate. Between January and the summer of 2013 public protest reached boiling point, and on 30 June Morsi was removed. In May 2014, after some constitutional preparations and changes, General el-Sisi, a Muslim who was appointed by Morsi, was elected as president to serve as a Muslim who wants a secular state and an arena of warring militias and jihadists. These are Egypt’s neighbours and it is important to consider Egypt’s actions and challenges in that context.

A close friend of mine who is half-Egyptian and whose Copt family lives in Alexandria and Cairo reported to me the rapidly growing mortal fear felt by Copts, as members of their congregation began to disappear and churches were attacked. The culture of fear was optimistic at best. From what I saw of people living in Egypt—I admit this is only anecdotal—the idea that elections would take place. From what I saw of people living in Egypt—I admit this is only anecdotal—the idea that elections would take place in a free and fair way in that culture of fear was optimistic at best.

I do not want anyone to think that I am describing a rosy situation—it is far from rosy. The younger population is very concerned and, interestingly enough, their concerns chime with the concerns about human rights abuses and clampdowns that we have heard in the Chamber today—concerns about the imprisonment of journalists and the appalling, tragic and diabolical treatment of the Italian Cambridge student. I do not have to take up valuable time in expressing how abominable that case is, because other hon. Members have done so far better than I could. Interestingly, students and young people said that it was not only abominable, but politically unnecessary, because Sisi enjoyed sufficient popularity to not need to clamp down in that heavy-handed way.

That brings me on to my next point: that such human rights abuses are not only fundamentally morally wrong, but dangerous for the country itself. Human rights abuses foster the kind of radicalism, extremism and takfiri thinking that Egypt is fundamentally pitched against. In looking at radicals such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, we see the detrimental effect that prison torture plays in radicalising budding or existing extremists. If we think that we have an incentive to crush extremism, look at Egypt’s neighbours and see just how urgent the crushing of that extremist takfiri mentality is to them. How can Egypt become more successful in eradicating extremism? My impression is that, in common with many countries that are facing modernisation and a perhaps already...
modernised younger generation, Egypt is experiencing the counterintuitive paradox of needing to grip less tightly in order to be stronger.

We had the great privilege and interesting experience of meeting many Members of the nascent Parliament. I remember the confusion in this Parliament—a great institution—when in 2010, for the first time in a long time, we had a coalition Government. Everyone ran around not quite knowing what was going on. Imagine a completely new Parliament, a set of 200 or so pieces of legislation that had to be reviewed in a short space of time and the establishment of much of the constitution—something we take for granted in this country. That is a Parliament that is really trying to get off the ground, so it would seem bizarre for Britain, which has such an established Parliament, not to take a lead in helping and nurturing that fledging to fly and to become the solid institution that is so important to form a politically stable country. The country is a brave and resilient one, trying to form a bastion of democracy amid a sea of hostility.

There are also deep concerns about Egypt’s economy. With oil prices falling, support from the Gulf is waning, and that is worrying. To create a healthier economy, Sisi has to perform a difficult balancing act by weaning the country off subsidies, while avoiding the public protests that would emerge to destabilise Egypt were prices of bread on the street to go up. Tourism accounts for 10% to 15% of the Egyptian economy—about 1% to 5% is from Britain. If we want Egypt to remain stable and to flourish, we need Sharm el-Sheikh flights to resume as soon as possible. The work there must be concluded quickly. In assessing the security of Sharm el-Sheikh flights, obviously we must put the safety of our citizens first, but we should also consider the security implications of not resuming the flights. An awful lot of Egyptian people depend on tourism. If they are left jobless and feeling spurned by Britain, we have to consider where they might turn for a livelihood and security. We do not want them to turn to extremism.

The stakes are high. If Egypt crumbles economically and social disorder breaks out, the ongoing migrant crisis in Europe that we fear now and this summer will increase dramatically. The exchange rate of the Egyptian currency is artificially high and floating the currency on the open market is a frighteningly risky prospect for the country. It would be a leap of faith, and in making any leap everyone needs to feel surrounded by friends who will help. Furthermore, if we do not help Egypt to modernise, social disorder will feed and nurture Daesh. It is hard to allocate blame in countries such as Syria and Libya and to solve the problem that is causing untold numbers of human rights abuses, we should not let the fact such abuses are taking place under a Government deter us from tackling them where they are happening on an abominable scale. It is easy for us to put our own blinders on, but it is important to mention Giulio Regeni, a research student who I believe lived in the constituency of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). I followed the case and it seems difficult to apportion blame directly, because not only are the Government responsible for some abuses, but there are rogue elements within the security apparatus. One thing that we have not mentioned is the fact that the Egyptian military is broadly involved in ramifying branches of economic and social life, business and so on. When people talk about the Egyptian Government, the notion is complicated.

Charlotte Leslie: My hon. Friend makes the case most eloquently. The more that we can help the Egyptian Government to stabilise institutionally and to have a better grip on its institutions, the more we can help the security services to operate in a way that we in the west like to see our security services operate. The more the security service and its activities can be aligned with the state, the more stable the country will be.

To go back to the point I was making, just because it is hard to allocate blame in countries such as Syria and Libya and to solve the problem that is causing untold numbers of human rights abuses, we should not let the fact such abuses are taking place under a Government deter us from tackling them where they are happening on an abominable scale. It is easy for us to put our own blinders on, but it is important to mention Giulio Regeni, a research student who I believe lived in the constituency of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). I followed the case and it seems difficult to apportion blame directly, because not only are the Government responsible for some abuses, but there are rogue elements within the security apparatus. One thing that we have not mentioned is the fact that the Egyptian military is broadly involved in ramifying branches of economic and social life, business and so on. When people talk about the Egyptian Government, the notion is complicated.

When looking at the human rights abuses, which are appalling, we need to ensure that we are focussing carefully what it is that we are concerned about. If we are concerned about human beings and their suffering, the metric of our judgments and actions on human rights abuses must be the number of people enduring such suffering. It can be easy to focus blame on the locus of responsibility, whether a Government or an institution, but much less easy to blame a failed state, because there is no one there to blame. We are, however, concerned about human beings and their lives, so we need to look at where the most human rights abuses take place: in a stable state or in a failed state.

Kwasi Kwarteng: With respect to human rights abuses, it is important to mention Giulio Regeni, a research student who I believe lived in the constituency of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). I followed the case and it seems difficult to apportion blame directly, because not only are the Government responsible for some abuses, but there are rogue elements within the security apparatus. One thing that we have not mentioned is the fact that the Egyptian military is broadly involved in ramifying branches of economic and social life, business and so on. When people talk about the Egyptian Government, the notion is complicated.

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My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) made a powerful case for the need for stability in Egypt. We owe it to the Egyptian people, to the British people, who are concerned about stability and the migrant process, to Europe and to everyone everywhere, whether moderate Muslims, Christians or of any religion, not to sit and condemn and carp at a country that is certainly not doing everything well and that certainly gives rise to much concern, but to help it to obliterate the things that cause us concern—to help one of the lone islands of stability attempting democracy that has not succumbed to instability and an Islamic takfiri alarming state to thrive and flourish. That is in the interests of all of us.

3.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for giving us a chance to speak on this matter. It does not seem like it is three years since we had a similar debate in Westminster Hall. Incidentally, I think the leader of the Labour party was part of that debate. Remarkably,
we seemed to agree across the Chamber on all the human rights and equality issues, and I do not believe it will be any different today, because the Members here are of the same mind.

For decades, Egypt has not only been a beacon of hope in the middle east and north Africa for freedom and liberty in comparison with its neighbours, but done well economically. The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) in her last few words referred to democracy in Egypt. Co-operation with NATO and the west has been priceless; we saw how much that meant when Egypt suffered from instability following what was called the Arab spring.

It is pleasing to see the shadow Minister and the Minister in their places. I look forward to both of their contributions and I am quite sure that the Minister will be as positive as ever. He has the ability to understand what we are thinking and put that in his answers.

At the end of last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) was appointed the economic envoy to Egypt—the Minister will know that. We are pleased that someone from this House has direct input and can carry the banner, so to speak, for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—in Northern Ireland we are fond of carrying banners. That is fantastic news and we fully support him.

Charlotte Leslie: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the very appointment of a trade envoy to Egypt—our current envoy is excellent—illustrates that the Government really want to engage? Does he also agree that in John Casson and Nasser Kamel we have two good ambassadors who are extremely good at engaging with their respective populations and acting together?

Jim Shannon: I can only agree with the hon. Lady on all those points. I will mention one of the ambassadors later on in my speech, because lots of good things have been done.

I want to look at the debate in a positive fashion, but I also want to highlight some issues. While we recognise the small and giant steps that Egypt has taken, we must look at some of the changes needed. I want to talk about them in a respectful fashion, which is important.

Relationships, which are proving fruitful, still exist as we seek to foster peace in the region. They are invaluable in the fight against Daesh. Egypt needs to be a lead nation in any coalition against Islamic State. We may not hear about it often, but Egypt’s borders are crossed many occasions from Libya, where Daesh groups operate in units. They have attacked and in their activities a number of Egyptian soldiers and civilians have been murdered. They are on the front line, so let us give them the support they need. When the Minister responds, he may probably be able to tell us a wee bit more about what we are doing. I know it is not his remit, but perhaps he can say how we can support them militarily. It is important that we do so and that we are seen to do so.

We need to do everything we can to support one of our strongest allies in the region in its drive to return to stability so that it can not only use its military and diplomatic capabilities, but reignite as the beacon of hope that once shone in north Africa and the middle east. For all its problems, Egypt has shown itself to be a bulwark against the instability and chaos that plagues other countries not too far away in the middle east and the Arab world. Instability has swept over them like a tidal wave, but it has not to the same extent in Egypt.

Egypt is strong, Egypt is our friend, and it makes economic, political and strategic sense to ensure that it remains our friend to provide the stability necessary in the middle east, now and in the years and decades to come. Notably, al-Sisi’s top security concern is the presence of Daesh in the Sinai peninsula. Earlier I mentioned the attacks from Daesh groups in Libya, which illustrate that. That is dangerous from a human point of view, a regional and global security point of view and an economic point of view. It offers a new launch pad for the abhorrent Daesh disturbingly close to our other ally in the region, the state of Israel.

It should be remembered—no one in the Chamber will have any doubts about it—that Israel has been Egypt’s ally from the beginning of biblical times. In the past the relationships were strong, even with the Arab and the Jew. We still have that working relationship between Egypt and Israel, which is perhaps unique in the middle east, not only on economic things, but to combat Daesh and take on the threat of Palestinian terrorists. Egypt sees the threat, Israel sees the threat, and they work together to ensure that the tunnels that have been used by some, coming from Egypt towards Israel and the Palestinians, are closed off. We must recognise that Egypt plays a part in that.

Members should be aware that that is being taken seriously by our diplomats in the region. The hon. Lady referred to our ambassador in Egypt, John Casson, who last week addressed an Egyptian Ministry of Tourism conference in Cairo. All Members who have spoken so far have rightly referred to the importance of tourism, which we need to reignite. We need to provide security first of all. Ambassador Casson stressed the importance of the points I have raised: the economic, diplomatic, strategic, and defence and security ties.

Charlotte Leslie: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in becoming one of the first people on a flight back to Sharm el-Sheikh? I am asking him on holiday.

Jim Shannon: As a married man, I have to be careful. [Laughter.] I am very loyal and dutiful to my wife, who I love, but if it was in a purely platonic way, I think that would be okay.

The ambassador praised the efforts of Egypt to re-emerge from the years of instability she suffered following the Arab spring and the Muslim Brotherhood takeover. Three years ago I had a chance to visit Egypt with the all-party parliamentary group on Egypt. I had always wanted to visit Egypt—I had a purpose. The APPG met President el-Sisi in his palace, so I had a chance to put to him issues about freedom of religious belief, which are important for me and for my Christian brothers and sisters in Egypt, and I was impressed by his response to the questions put—I could not say otherwise. He showed his commitment to the change he wanted to see and the society he wanted in Egypt. I was impressed by that. He also won the election shortly after that, and let us be quite clear: a democratic process was carried out and he was overwhelmingly elected. The people were not happy with the Muslim Brotherhood—although they were not happy with Mubarak either—but I believe that President al-Sisi delivered a democratic process to them.
On our visit the members of the all-party group had a chance to raise some issues. We met a pastor in a church in Cairo, called Pastor Sami. People often say to me, when I mention him, “Is he from Belfast?” I say, “No, he is not; he is from Cairo, and he is an Egyptian.” Seven thousand people attend that evangelical church in Cairo, but you will never hear about that, Mr Pritchard. It is one of those things that come out only from visits to Egypt or from having direct contact with places in the area. Pastor Sami wanted the changes. I expressed to him my concerns about people who had converted from Islam to Christianity, and a block being put on that. I think there are a number of Christian MPs in Parliament in Egypt, taking part in the democratic process and making changes, as they should.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Would the hon. Gentleman suggest how, if at all, what he describes is an improvement on the regime of the Muslim Brotherhood?

Jim Shannon: First, it is an improvement because people can pursue their religious beliefs without fear in Egypt today. There are still attacks, but there is a change, and I have seen that. When I visited I had a chance to meet the Grand Mufti. It was an opportunity to meet someone of Muslim beliefs at a high level and to ask him his personal opinion on the new Egypt that we would see shortly afterwards. He made a commitment to ensure that people would have the opportunity to express their religious belief without repercussions. I want that to come from the top, and to go all the way down; and I think there are levels further down that it has not yet reached. There are steps to be taken—small ones and big ones.

The Islamic groups that have infiltrated into Egypt are more violent. In the Sinai region, radical groups seem to operate with impunity. Christians are punished and pushed outside the proper legal process. Coptic Christians, as the hon. Member for Spelthorne mentioned, have been expelled from their villages. There is persecution and discrimination, and one example I know of concerns a schoolgirl whose name is Marina. She is 10 and the youngest of six children. Her mum and dad are illiterate, but they send all the children to school. As a Christian, she has to sit at the back of the class on her own, isolated and perhaps marginalised. It is such levels that must be reached if there is to be real change for people in Egypt. I know that everyone in the Chamber wants that to happen as well. Christian women have been kidnapped and raped, and involved in relationships that they find abhorrent. Christian buildings and churches have not been repaired in some cases, but in fairness there has been some change on that. There has been rebuilding of churches, and protection, in Cairo.

The response to the saddening and shocking events at Sharm el-Sheikh is an example of exactly what is needed on every level. Britain, Germany and Russia, to name a few of the nations in question, have taken steps to co-operate further with the Egyptian Government to ensure that Sharm el-Sheikh can be a model for security at airports and show strength and resilience in the face of terror and cowardice. There is a young girl who works in my office as my researcher, and when she got married she had her honeymoon in Sharm el-Sheikh. At the time there was not any bother, and she recommended it for a holiday—a honeymoon is of course a bit better as a holiday—and an opportunity to enjoy some special time.

There is great development potential in the Nile delta. On our visit we hoped to see some of that development. With the water source there is agriculture and agribusiness, which create jobs and enable food to be grown, moving Egypt, with its massive population, towards some sort of self-sufficiency, if that is possible. Among various issues there has been talk of Ethiopia building a dam, which might cause some problems. I do not know whether the Minister will be able to respond on that, or give us an idea of where things are in that process, but Egypt can develop and create jobs. The resurgence of gas and oil and access to Egypt’s vast energy resources are of interest to everyone, and helping an ally to develop those resources is much better than relying on enemies for energy, as the west too often finds itself doing. BP and British Gas have found Egypt to be an ideal business partner recently, and utilising our relationship with Egypt to further voluntary co-operation and trade across the region will open up the prospect of prosperity to millions of oppressed people—a vast population who need employment. We should remember that they need prosperity as well as the peace we all continue to work for.

I have outlined an array of issues on Egypt, including the concerns of the all-party group. I have mentioned the role of my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley as an envoy to Egypt, and there is already an apparatus that we can build on to ensure support from the United Kingdom. I hope that will help to ensure that what was once a towering pillar of stability and a beacon of hope in the Arab world can come roaring back to its former self and sit again at the top table of global powers and economies, alongside the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

3.27 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to be called to speak in the debate, and I commend the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for securing it. I thank him for the brief background he gave us, from his own experience, reminding us what a great country Egypt is, and what a much greater country it can become. It is, I think, the 16th biggest country in the world, and often we do not appreciate that. Not too long ago different cultures and traditions, and people of different faiths and none, could mix comfortably, respecting one another’s traditions but with the freedom to carry on their own. Clearly, that is what we want Egypt to return to.

We must recognise that Egypt belongs to the Egyptians, so in our dealings with them we must be careful. By all means we should encourage them to move towards the kind of society that we think the citizens are entitled to; by all means we should use diplomatic and other ties to try to develop the interests of the United Kingdom in relation to Egypt; but at all times we should respect the rights of Egypt’s citizens to choose a Government and un-choose them should they see fit.

I think we can see optimistic signs even in the behaviour of President Sisi. A lot of what he has done recently is completely unacceptable and contrary to any interpretation of international human rights law; that must be made
clear to him. However, he has the potential to change course. There has been some sign of a small but welcome softening of attitude on law and order, for example. It is unacceptable that hundreds of people can be taken and sentenced to death almost at one time. Some of those death sentences have been commuted, and that is something we should encourage. President Sisi received military command training in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America, so he knows where the boundaries lie between using military means to ensure security and abusing military power to oppress either his own people or anyone else. He knows what is acceptable and what is not. I think there is something there that we can work with, which perhaps we do not have with some of the other dictators or semi dictators in the region.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) rightly reminded us what can happen if someone who is elected democratically stops being democratic and is allowed to get away with that.

The persecution of religious minorities, to which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred, is something that we cannot afford to ignore. We should remember that the persecution of Christians is an anti-Islamic action in exactly the same way as anti-Semitic or Islamophobic persecution is an anti-Christian action. All of those faiths teach fundamentally that we are all of the human rights of tens of millions of people. That, again, is not acceptable.

We need to ensure that when we talk about stability, we do not mean the stability there has been in some countries in the past, where stability meant military dictatorship. Often, if there is a brutal military dictatorship, there is stability, but it comes at the cost of the violation of the human rights of tens of millions of people. That, again, is not acceptable.

The influence that the United Kingdom can exert in Egypt comes from our shared history, since a lot of the history of Egypt has been closely bound up with that of the United Kingdom, and from the fact that the United Kingdom is now the single biggest foreign investor in Egypt. There is an avenue for the Government to encourage businesses that are investing in Egypt to invest in things that will help Egypt, not hinder it, and in projects that will support the development of a democratic society rather than simply prop up a discredited regime.

The Government must also continue to remind the Egyptian authorities that the United Kingdom has—or should have—a policy of not investing in Governments whose human rights record is poor and not showing signs of improvement. The carrot of investment would then be there, but the stick—the threat of that investment being stopped—could be used, not to ensure that Egypt develops into the country we say it should, but to allow and encourage Egypt to develop the fundamental principles that cross international borders such as human rights, the rule of law, respect for democracy and respect for diversity in society.

I believe there is a good possibility that if we play it right, we can help Egypt to develop back into the kind of society that will be in the best interests of its 90 million citizens. That means, for example, that we need to encourage the development of Egypt’s tourist industry and see the air routes into Sharm el-Sheikh and elsewhere reopened, but we should not just do that to give our people a nice place to go on holiday; we should do it because it helps to stabilise Egypt’s economy. Once the economy is stabilised, it will become much easier for ideas such as democracy and the rule of law to be re-established.

We have to be very careful indeed that we do not allow tourism to destroy the extraordinary and ancient culture that people are going to see in the first place. We cannot allow tourism to cause the Nile valley, for example, to become one great big western holiday resort—partly because that would be morally and ethically wrong, but also because that kind of behaviour creates a climate in which young Muslims growing up in Egypt will readily believe the myth that the country has been taken over by evil western heathens.

We have to be careful to ensure that allowing opposition groups to flourish without persecution in Egypt does not mean that terrorist groups or groups that espouse terror are allowed to develop undetected. I have a concern about the way that President Sisi has been treating the Muslim Brotherhood. It may be that some of its members are resorting to or promoting terrorism; if they are, they deserve to be taken through the courts and imprisoned. However, we have to be very careful indeed if we are outlawing the single biggest opposition party in any country simply because all its members are accused of being terrorists. Going in too heavy-handed in that way will create a climate where if young people who want a more Muslim society—whether we agree with that ourselves or not—do not have the right to promote their views through peaceful, lawful and democratic means, there are other avenues open to them that they may want to pursue. As has been said, there are others in Egypt and elsewhere who will be only too keen to encourage them to adopt such other methods.

Mention has been made of the high-performing UK ambassadorial staff. I have not met any of the embassy staff in Egypt, but I have certainly been very impressed with the embassy staff I have met in the other countries I have visited so far. The fact that the UK ambassador was prepared to speak out against the treatment of the three al Jazeera journalists is an encouraging sign. That is the kind of diplomatic pressure that we should continue to apply.

Just this week, we saw a TV presenter in Egypt jailed for mocking a woman who came on a television programme to be interviewed about a claim she had made of sexual harassment. It is appalling for a TV journalist to suggest to an alleged victim of sexual assault that it was her own fault because she went out wearing jeans and a sleeveless top; that is not an acceptable way for a journalist or anyone else to treat a victim of crime. However, throwing someone into jail for that is an overreaction. I do not condone making videos that mock someone else’s religion, but it is a serious overreaction for the Egyptians to have thrown three young Christians in Egypt into jail for producing a video that appeared to mock Islam. In that case, the teenagers said they were mocking Daesh, not Islam. I do not agree with anyone...
mocking another’s religion, but I do not agree with throwing people into jail for doing that. There are other ways in which we can encourage respect for one another’s faiths.

I am concerned about an apparent shift in emphasis from the UK Government. Whether it is through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills or any other Department, concern for promoting human rights in the countries in which we do business appears to be moving further down the order of priorities, while the promotion of interests of UK business and UK investors appears be to moving further up. I understand and support the desire to let British businesses prosper in other countries, but I ask the Government to ensure that we never do anything that is seen to give succour to those in either government or opposition who want to undermine the rule of law and democracy and those who may want to turn Egypt into a country that is a significant danger for us and for those who live there.

It is appalling that a young Italian student who had previously lived in the UK was taken away, tortured and murdered. It is also appalling that hundreds—perhaps thousands—of Egyptian citizens live with the danger of the same thing happening to them. Many of them have died in similar circumstances. The torture and murder of an Egyptian citizen should appall us just as much as the torture and murder of an Italian or UK citizen. I want to see an Egypt where all 90 million Egyptian citizens can live in peace and harmony with one another.

3.37 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Quarteng) on securing the debate. He spoke with great experience and knowledge of Egypt and set it in its proper context; I think we all benefited from that introduction. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who spoke clearly and effectively about the horrific death of Giulio Regeni. I will say a little more about that later on.

The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) set out so well the context of Egypt in the region. She used what I thought was a very good phrase: “democracy was never going to happen as it does in Tunbridge Wells”. That was very telling. The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Peter Grant) said, the UK is the biggest source of direct investment into Egypt. More than 1,000 British companies invest in and operate in Egypt in sectors such as finance, energy, construction, pharmaceuticals and IT.

Of course, as the hon. Members for Spelthorne and for Bristol North West said, there are also the thousands of British tourists who visit each year, or would if they could get to Sharm el-Sheikh. I hope that when the Minister responds, he will be able to update us on the progress made on restoring flights to Sharm el-Sheikh. Those flights are vital for the Egyptian economy, which desperately needs the summer season, and for British holidaymakers, who are already making their plans. In fact, numerous holiday firms, including Thomas Cook, are currently offering holidays to Sharm from May, so is the Minister confident that the security measures will be sufficient by then for flights to resume?

Egypt is, of course, more than just an economic partner to the UK; it is also an important strategic partner in the Arab world and a key ally in the fight against extremism, against Daesh and Assad in Syria, and in north Africa and the Sinai. We need to work with Egypt to tackle extremism, and we want it to do more to tackle terror financing. All of that gives us a very good reason to work with Egypt and, for those reasons, we need a stable Egypt.

It is clear that over the past two years, the Government have improved relations with Egypt. Since the election of President Sisi in June 2014, albeit on quite a small turnout, the Government have gone out of their way to build relations with the Sisi Government, and I welcome many aspects of this Government’s work to improve those relations. First, as I have said, it is very important that we co-operate on security and countering extremism. Secondly, as an MP for Hull, which is a key centre for renewable energy, I was very pleased to see the memorandum of understanding signed on a multibillion pound renewable energy deal with a British company. Thirdly, I am very pleased to see that 2016 is the year of British-Egyptian co-operation on science, innovation and higher education.

However, we have to remain critical friends of the Sisi regime. To promote stability, we need not just to support the Government of President Sisi, but to encourage his Government to tackle some of the underlying issues that have caused so much instability over the past few years. Stability requires respect for human rights, for the constitution and for democratic participation. It requires corruption to be tackled and the rule of law to be promoted, and we cannot promote academic co-operation and innovation unless we also promote academic freedoms.

The Amnesty International report from 2015-16 paints a bleak picture for those aspects of Egyptian society. The rule of law has been undermined by mass detentions and mass trials, which are rarely fair. The relationship between the state and its citizens has been undermined by routine allegations of police brutality, torture, arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearances. The treatment of women is a particular concern in relation to sexual violence.

Respect for democratic institutions has been undermined by repeated attacks on freedoms of assembly and non-governmental organisations, and I am very concerned that those actions, as the hon. Member for Bristol North West said, are fuelling the disquiet that has previously led to problems and revolutions in Egypt, and are making it more difficult for there to be a transition to a fully stable democracy.

Charlotte Leslie: Although I agree with much of what the hon. Lady outlines, does she agree that there is a ray of hope in that in the new Parliament, it is surprising how many women representatives, in particular, there are and how many people from different faiths?
Diana Johnson: I am very pleased to have taken that intervention. I think that is a good sign—if there are more women in any Parliament, it is usually a good sign of progress, so I welcome that.

To get back to my point, it is important that the British Government should be prepared to make it clear to the Government in Egypt that we expect them to operate to a higher standard on human rights issues. It is in our interest to promote British values of human rights and democracy, and it is also in the interests of Egyptian stability for it to do the same. However, as an example of the Government’s reluctance to do that, I want to return to the case of Giulio Regeni, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge. He set out so effectively what happened in the horrific murder of this academic and talked about what has been described—the systematic ripping out of fingernails, the broken ribs, and the brain haemorrhage that happened to this man. It is just appalling.

I raised some parliamentary questions with our Government to ask what their response was. I was told that the Government support the Egyptian and Italian investigations, but reports suggest that the Egyptian investigation is seriously flawed. The Italian ambassador has complained of a lack of access. There are real concerns about whether Egypt has the capacity to conduct a genuinely impartial investigation.

I wrote to the Minister on 16 February 2016 pressing upon him the importance of this case and the need for Britain to intervene to ensure that an impartial investigation takes place and to offer British assistance. I look forward to receiving a response from him. In particular, given that we are in this year of co-operation on education and research, I would think that the Government have had many opportunities to raise this case. There have been press releases, partnership agreements and a visit from the Prime Minister’s special envoy, but academic freedoms seem to have been excluded from that academic dialogue. We appear to have had a situation in which the Prime Minister’s special envoy was in Egypt discussing academic co-operation, weeks after the body of a murdered British academic was found, but as I understand it, that was not raised.

Other countries have not remained silent. The Italian Prime Minister Renzi stressed that it was because of his Government’s “friendship” with President Sisi that he stood in a position to demand the truth and stressed that it was critical for the future of Italian-Egyptian relations. The UK Government need to realise that it is because of the strength of our economic, social and security co-operation that we can also be in the position of critical friends. Weakness from the Government in not taking the matter up is not helpful. I hope that the Minister, in his response this afternoon, will be able to reassure us that he is having those conversations with the Egyptian authorities. I also look forward to him responding to the other points that I have raised, particularly on tourism.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to work under your chairmanship again, Mr Pritchard, and I echo the comments that have been made across the floor; this has been a very timely and important debate. I congratulate, as others have done, my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng)—my good friend—on securing this debate and on opening it with an exposé of his knowledge and understanding of what is happening not just in Egypt but in the region itself, and of Britain’s unique relationship and the role that Parliament is playing.

I want to say thank you to colleagues: it is because we are able to visit the country a number of times and develop relationships to understand what is going on that we can speak with some authority about matters there and have debates such as this in this House. We are all the wiser for that, and the relationship is all the stronger, so I am very encouraged. I have visited the country a number of times as a Back Bencher and as a Minister, and I know that Egypt very much appreciates such visits and appreciates the dialogue too.

We have heard some excellent contributions, as the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), has said. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) raised specific points, and the link is understandable given the academic connection with Giulio Regeni. I will come to that matter and speak in a bit of detail.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) spoke of the challenges in Governments and the changes that have taken place. It is fair to say that any country that had endured the decade of change that Egypt has had to go through would have been severely tested. It is pleasing to see the direction of travel that Egypt is going in, but none the less, a huge amount of work still needs to be done. That is why Britain must stand firm in providing that support.

I was pleased that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) took a bit out of my speech by commenting on the importance and role of the trade envoy, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson): we are very pleased that the right hon. Gentleman is able to take on that role. It underlines the significance of having these trade envoy positions, which allow detailed knowledge to be exchanged and for that relationship to be pursued. The hon. Member for Strangford also spoke of some of the military support that we are providing as Egypt deals with terrorism, and I will come to that in my speech, too.

The hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) spoke of the importance of the continuing governance of reform and I very much agree. I am sad to say that he also made this very binary: either we challenge the human rights situation and therefore the prosperity agenda stops, or we are happy with the human rights situation and therefore prosperity can start. I am afraid it is not as simple as that. I should make it clear that our work and our relationship, which comes not just from the commercial angle, allow us to have frank conversations to the frustration of those who would like to see more in the public domain. We often find ourselves having greater leverage in and influence on what is going on behind the scenes because of the manner in which we conduct our activities, which is not always on the front pages of the newspapers.

Peter Grant: I certainly did not intend to give the impression that the choice is between human rights on one hand and economic prosperity on the other. If I gave that impression, I apologise. The point I wanted to make was that Egypt given us the best possible opportunity to demonstrate that respect for human rights, diversity and economic prosperity can all happen at the same time.
Mr Ellwood: I will come to that point as I develop my argument.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North spoke in her usual formidable style and clearly understands these matters. We spar on a number of issues across the middle east and I thank her for the tone she adopts in these debates when putting forward extremely important points. She spoke first about the flight concern, which I will come to, and the case of the Italian student, the importance of the economy and, linked to that, stability and the opportunities in front of us. I am grateful for the points she made. As always, if I do not cover all the points that have been made, I will write to hon. Members in due course.

In the limited time available, I want to take a step back and place Egypt today in context. It is worth reminding ourselves that it is a cradle of ancient civilisation and a very proud part of the world. It has gifted to the world some of the earliest forms of central governance, literature and major feats of engineering. It connected the world with the Suez canal in the 19th century and has been a centre of Arab culture and regional political leadership in the 20th century.

In the Arab world, Egypt sits astride the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League and occupies a unique position in international affairs. Despite experiencing some tumultuous times in the 21st century, Egypt has delivered another major feat of engineering through expansion of the Suez canal in just one year under President Sisi. That truly represents Egypt’s ambition in looking forward.

Although not as long standing as Egypt’s ancient history, Britain’s interests are also deep and long standing in modern times and include an historical British presence, close business links, more recent efforts to bring peace in the region and working together on the UN Security Council. President Sisi’s visit to the UK in November was an important moment in deepening our relationship further and an opportunity to have those frank conversations I spoke about.

Egypt is the Arab world’s most populous country, is on the frontline in the war against Daesh and in north-east Sinai, and has a critical role in bringing stability and security to Libya. Egypt is a vital partner in a troubled region. It is clear that its stability is in our interests. I am proud to say that since 2010 the UK has spent some £30 million in Egypt and we plan to spend a further £50 million between now and 2020. All this funding has the ultimate aim of helping to support the country’s continued stability. There are, of course, many aspects to stability. Our work in Egypt focuses on security, the economy, governance and education. I will take each in turn.

A number of hon. Members asked about security. The crash of the Metrojet airliner, the murder of a Croatian oil worker and the attacks on Egyptian troops make it clear that Egypt faces a real threat from terrorism, so security is key. To protect ordinary Egyptians, tackle radicalisation and safeguard tourists, we are working closely with the Egyptian Government, training bomb disposal officers and close protection officers, and working with military officers to Sandhurst and other prestigious military training establishments here in the UK. This will help to meet the threat emanating from north-west Sinai and the region.

Egypt’s greatest external security threat remains Daesh’s planning and launching of attacks from bases in eastern Libya. The UK is supporting Libyan efforts to finalise a Government of national accord, which is vital because only a unified national Government can begin the difficult work of restoring stability and tackling the threat posed by Daesh from the west of Egypt. In Gaza, the UK is providing aid and working to convince Israel, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority to take steps to improve conditions, which is in the interests of Egypt’s long-term security.

We are, of course, continuing our extremely close co-operation on aviation security so that we can resume flights as soon as possible. Sharm el-Sheikh is proven to be a clear favourite with tourists. Prior to the changes, almost 1 million visitors wanted to go to Egypt every year. I am unable to give further details, but huge efforts have been made. I spoke to the deputy National Security Adviser yesterday. Some final pieces of the jigsaw need to be put in place, but I hope it will not be too long before flights are resumed.

The hon. Member for Cambridge raised the very sad case of Giulio Regeni. I can only echo what I said in my reply to the question. We are very saddened by this tragic death and very concerned about the reports that he had been tortured. He is an Italian citizen and there is protocol on who can lead and participate in the investigation. Having said that, we have raised our concerns with the Italian authorities. We very much support Italian and Egyptian efforts to investigate and have requested that that be done in full to recognise what happened. The Italian police now have a team on the ground in Egypt. We will continue to raise the matter. I will be visiting the country very soon and will certainly ask further questions, but although the individual studied in the UK, there is a protocol on which country can lead and be involved.

Egypt has elected a President, has a new constitution and now has a Parliament, which is to be celebrated. We are working to help to make parliamentarians stronger and to encourage visits. I hope that the work with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy will continue. As the new Parliament beds in, we want to do more to strengthen this vital institution and I hope that Members with a keen interest in Egypt, many of whom are here today, will be able to play an active role in that.1

We are looking to President Sisi and the Egyptian Government to make more progress on human rights—that has been echoed today—and on freedoms. We are concerned about detention of political and civil society activists and journalists, deaths and reports of torture in police detention and prisons, and the continued narrowing of space for civil society to operate freely. We continue to believe that respect for human rights is vital to effective governance for the Egyptian people and long-term stability.

A vibrant economy is a necessary precondition for security and democracy. I am proud that Britain remains the largest foreign investor in Egypt. British companies have invested over £25 billion in recent years. I was pleased to lead the largest trade delegation to Egypt for 15 years when we had the pleasure of meeting President Sisi.

Education has an important role and I am pleased that the British Council has taught English to over 90,000 Egyptians in the last five years.

I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne a few minutes to respond so I will conclude. We remain a close and important partner of Egypt. I am grateful for this debate to underline our commitment to the country and pleased that other Members of Parliament have also been able to do so.

3.59 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am grateful for this wide-ranging debate in which we have hit many of the principal issues. The tragic death of Giulio Regeni stains Egypt’s reputation, but I am sure that with the Minister’s good offices our Government will do their part in bringing some form of closure and justice to the situation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered British support for stability in Egypt.
In the report to the planning committee on 18 February, at appendix 9, consultants engaged by the county council described the Bargates site as “not big enough for the accommodation required for a two form entry primary school”.

That would have been correct if the site in question was only 2.8 acres, as they asserted in their report; however, the site is 4.74 acres and comprises land currently in the ownership of Dorset County Council, the Dorset police and crime commissioner, the Hospital of St Mary Magdalen Trust, and Christchurch Borough Council. Under Department for Education guidelines set out in “Building Bulletin 103” of June 2014, the actual area would be more than sufficient for a two form entry primary school.

As co-owners of the site, the county council and the borough council must have known that the Bargates site is much larger than described in the report. Local people are wondering why they—and, I think, many county councillors and borough councillors—have been kept in the dark. The suspicion is that all the public authorities that own the land would think themselves financially better off if they used the Bargates site for more lucrative development than the provision of primary school education. It is therefore in their financial interests that the school be built on much less expensive green-belt land. As I am sure the Minister will agree, that pattern is repeated up and down the country. The cheapest land available is often the green-belt land, precisely because of its protection. If a local authority is proposing to develop green-belt land where the consequence is that it will save itself money, it is incumbent on my hon. Friend to be even more circumspect in deciding whether to allow that to go through without intervention from the centre.

It has taken some 12 years to assemble this unique town centre site. Plans for the development of the site have not yet been published, let alone been the subject of public consultation, but I understand from a meeting that I had at the beginning of last month that there are proposals for a 3,000-square-metre care home and 1,850 square metres of retail. The remainder of the site would be for housing, but there would be no community use.

Government policy on green belt is designed to encourage the redevelopment of brownfield land. The land at Bargates is exactly that. There are 221 car parking spaces there, on open land; there is a redundant magistrates court and police station; and there is a substantial residential building, currently boarded up, with a big adjoining garden, which certainly until recently was used for the keeping of pigs. That is being released by the Magdalen charity. That is the site, but at the meeting of the planning committee council officers argued that it could not possibly be used for education purposes because it was not mentioned for education in the core strategy. Of course, nowhere was mentioned for education in the core strategy, because the education authority was asserting at that stage that there was no need for any new sites in the borough for schools. Therefore, this site was not mentioned, nor was the green-belt site at Marsh Lane. If the county council had been more up front, the debate about the core strategy could, and indeed would, have included the relative merits of building a new school in the town centre as against building a school on the fringes of the town, on the green belt.

The advantage of building the school in the town centre is that it would form part of a new education cluster. It would be much easier for families with children at both the secondary school and the primary school to do the school run, because the primary school would be very close to the secondary school, Twynham Academy, for which it is the feeder and, indeed, in the grounds of which the primary school is currently housed. It will also be part of the Twynham Learning Federation, which is headed by Twynham Academy but will also include the new Twynham primary from this September. It would be easily accessible by public transport from both east and west Christchurch and it would be close to town centre car parks. The buildings would be available for community use during the evenings, holidays and weekends in a location convenient to the public. The school pupils would be within easy walking distance of town centre amenities such as the library, the Regent Centre, the Priory church and the playing fields and recreation ground on the opposite side of the road. Adequate undeveloped land on the site would be available for play space.

The report that went to the planning committee from the officers said that there would be no room for playing fields. However, in the letter sent to Councillor Jamieson by the principal planning officer, Mr Williams, on 17 February, Mr Williams says that the provision of playing fields would be very expensive. He does not refer to the fact that it would not be possible to provide playing fields on that site. That goes to the core of the issue. It is much cheaper to provide playing fields on open green-belt land adjoining the marsh and the flood plain but that is not what planning policy is, or should be, about.

At the meeting of the planning committee, the report to the committee from the county council officer also said, “The current buildings would be unsuitable and would have to be demolished and replaced.”

Well, that is accepted. Everybody accepts that the old magistrates court with the cells down below and the police station need to be knocked down, but I do not see that as an objection to building a new school on the site. The county council officer raised other concerns including the one to which I referred earlier—that the site is too small. In other words, the council officers were misleading the councillors who were considering the planning application by providing facts that were not correct.

The officers went on to say that the school is geographically in the wrong location for the community it needs to serve. That is not correct either. The school that is proposed to be built on the green belt is currently temporarily housed at Twynham Academy, which is a few hundred yards down the road from the Bargates site.

Another objection raised by the county council officers is that because the Bargates site is in a town centre location, it is unsuitable for a primary school. Again, that is in defiance of local experience. One of the most popular primary schools in Christchurch is the Priory Church of England Primary School, which is on a small site in the centre of town and has the same catchment as the new school. The new school is already in temporary accommodation right in the centre of the town and there has been no suggestion that parents have been put off by the location. Indeed, many regard it as much more convenient for the school run.
From what I have said, the Minister may agree that the conclusion reached by the responsible officer in paragraph 6.14 of his recommendation is not consistent with the facts. Yet the officer went on to say,

“I am satisfied that there are no other sites of sufficient size to meet the identified development need that are available and should be regarded as preferential alternatives to the application site”.

As I have said, that conclusion was based on false information. That the Bargates site is not available is an extraordinary assertion to make, because the site is still owned by the county council, the borough council and the police authority. If the county council and borough council were prepared to recognise educational needs as a priority, the solution to the development of the site for a school would be in their hands. Public consultation on future uses of the site is not intended to start until May, with a view to a planning application later in the year. That consultation could easily be about using the site for a primary school, with a planning application later in the year to meet the timetable required for the new school.

The other issue worth mentioning is the size of the school. The new Twynham Primary Academy to which the Secretary of State for Education has recently given authority is one form entry. Expressions of interest were invited by Dorset County Council on the basis that, “The projected pupil numbers have identified an immediate requirement for 1FE with a further growth to 2FE when population figures warrant it and agreed” by the county council. The statement is reinforced in the county council’s January 2016 paper, “Christchurch pupil place planning strategy 2016-2019”. The paper is marked as a confidential document, but for the purposes of the debate it is important that everybody should know that paragraph 2.1 says,

“For west Christchurch, DCC continues to pursue the establishment of a new 1FE Primary School. The site/building will have capacity to expand to 2FE if required in the future.”

So the county council accepts that there is no immediate need for a two form entry school, which bears upon the issue of the timescale within which the situation should be sorted out properly.

The county council says that the area only needs a one form entry school with the capacity to go to two forms, partly because that would deliver six forms of entry for primary school places in west Christchurch. That takes no account of the new Parkfield School, a primary free school that opens in 2016 with two form entry and is located in the western part of west Christchurch, close to the airport. Yet the county council gave itself permission for a two form entry primary school with the potential to extend to three form entry. Why did it do that? It involves an unwarranted impact on the neighbourhood and intrusion into the green belt that is not justified even by the county council’s own evidence.

The implications are that the proposed design of the school, as approved, has been criticised by the borough council as being intrusive in the landscape. In response, the county council has said that the school needs to be in that position so that the council could make it into a three-form entry school in the future. The borough council’s criticism could have been addressed if the school were to be one form entry with the option of additional buildings to make it two form in the future. A one form entry school with the potential to be two form entry would obviously have much less impact on the green belt, the sites of special scientific interest and local traffic. It would also fit more easily on to the town centre site to which I referred, and on to some of the other sites that the county council said could not accommodate it because it needed a site for a two form entry school.

This is a serious issue. If we have a public inquiry, the inspector could look at the alternative sites to the green belt and could examine the evidence, which is contradictory. The county council is asserting that it needs a two form entry primary school, but the county council officers, in a confidential document, say that it only needs a one form entry school.

Many people have asked why the draft core strategy, which was adopted in 2014, did not envisage the need to propose or allocate a site for a new school. Christchurch county councillors were informed by Mr Williams in a letter on 17 February that,

“Late in the preparation process my understanding is that discussions took place between Planning Officers at Christchurch Borough Council and representatives of the County Council as local Education Authority over the possible need for a new primary school to serve West Christchurch. As the Draft Core Strategy was already at a very advanced stage, a decision was taken not to modify the Strategy to take account of the potential additional development requirement. The planning application proposal has, therefore, fallen to be promoted as a departure from the Development Plan.”

The problem is that as a departure from the development plan is decided by the county council itself, it is not open to the same independent scrutiny and examination as it would have been had it been dealt with as part of the core strategy, which is another reason that it is essential that this—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that he might want to hear what the Minister has to say on the matter. He has already eaten somewhat considerably into the Minister’s time.

Mr Chope: I am familiar with that, Mrs Main. I am using, say, 20 minutes of the 30 minutes available to put my case, because I know, having been a junior planning Minister in the past, that the Minister will not be able to give me a very substantive reply today. I hope he will be able to say that he has listened to what I have had to say, and then to make some other comments about the importance of preserving the green belt. I have not had an opportunity to put all the concerns on the record, and I thought it was important to do so in this debate, which I hope will not cause my hon. Friend, the Minister, any problems.

In conclusion, I hope that, taking all I have said into account, the Minister will call in the application for the Secretary of State’s consideration and will effectively have an independent public inquiry into the issue.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope) on securing this debate and on putting so fully his case on behalf of his residents. I appreciate his concerns, particularly on the more
general issue of development on green belt, which I know is of considerable importance to him, to communities including the ones he represents, and to other parliamentary colleagues.

As my hon. Friend has outlined, and as he understands, the proposal is currently before the Secretary of State to determine whether call-in is appropriate. As we have also received a request to intervene from my hon. Friend, it would be inappropriate of me to comment on the specific application, as that could prejudice any consideration of these matters. I know he understands that. I will, however, outline a few things more generally, as he rightly guessed I might, to give some background to the present situation.

To put the matter in context, about 475,000 planning applications are made to local authorities every year. Obviously, we have powers to call in some decisions, and the current approach is set out in a written ministerial statement of October 2012. To put it in context, in 2015 just 24 cases were called in by the Planning Inspectorate for inquiry. He will be reassured to know that the officials of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government are currently considering the application on the Secretary of State’s behalf. Their assessment will consider whether the application, or the issues raised by concerned parties, justifies intervention based on the Government’s call-in policy. The Secretary of State or one of the other Ministers will decide whether to intervene.

The national planning policy framework is very clear that the purpose of planning is to deliver sustainable development. I make it clear that it is not development at any cost, nor is it development anywhere. Localism means choosing how best to meet local needs, not whether to meet them. Meeting local need is not just about houses; as my hon. Friend rightly outlined, it is also about the wider needs of the community, including educational needs.

We are committed to improving the education of our younger generation. We have worked hard to encourage efficient use of land and buildings to facilitate the schools we need. We have also ensured that the national planning policy framework makes it clear that local authorities should take a proactive, positive and collaborative approach to meeting educational needs. The framework and accompanying guidance are clear that local planning authorities should work with other providers to assess the quality and capacity of infrastructure, including education infrastructure, as part of their local plan. Such plans are important, and they should set out a positive vision for the area; they should also be realistic about what can be achieved and when, including with regard to infrastructure. In areas where there is both a county council and a district council, it is important that those bodies work together constructively to gather evidence of likely educational needs and to look for the correct and appropriate sites for any new required schools.

I congratulate Christchurch Borough Council on putting in place a core strategy in 2014. An up-to-date local plan, prepared through extensive public consultation, sets the framework in which decisions are and should be taken, whether locally by the planning authority or, I stress, at appeal.

My hon. Friend knows that the Government attach the highest importance, as he does, to protecting our green belt. Our new guidance in 2014 re-emphasised the importance of green belt and adds that the presence of constraints such as green belt can constrain the ability of a planning authority to meet its needs. We make it clear that green-belt boundaries should be established in local plans, which can be altered only in exceptional circumstances using the local plan process of consultation and independent examination. I note that Christchurch Borough Council decided and successfully argued for changes to its green-belt boundaries to allow for new development to go forward, which is why it was a locally led, properly calculated decision.

I understand what must be my hon. Friend’s frustration that, following that review of green-belt boundaries by the council in a proper and appropriate way, proposals are still being made for green-belt land. Our planning system allows people to make proposals for development in areas such as green belt, but most types of new buildings are inappropriate development in the green belt and by definition, therefore, are harmful to it. The national planning policy framework makes it clear that such development should not be approved except in very exceptional, special circumstances. Each planning case obviously has its own unique facts and contexts that have to be determined on their own merits.

When I am out visiting communities and speaking to constituents, I hear widespread support for the provision of more housing, more schools and more hospitals for our growing population, which I know my hon. Friend recognises and supports, but that support is often swiftly followed by concerns about where those homes, hospitals and schools should be built, with appeals to protect our open and green spaces and countryside. It is therefore important that new developments are located in the right place for each local area. We are committed to ensuring that delays in the planning process are kept to a minimum, but I assure him that we will be aiming to issue a decision on whether to call in the proposal as soon as possible. He has made his views clearly known today, and he will be formally notified as soon as that decision has been made.

Question put and agreed to.
**Human Rights Framework: Scotland**

4.27 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future framework for human rights in Scotland.

The framework for human rights in Scotland is reaching a critical point, and determining its future has therefore become an issue that my colleagues and I have been attempting to bring before the Attorney General and the Secretary of State for Justice for quite some time. We believe that any future framework currently rests on a constitutional precipice, one that requires more substance from the Government than we have received up to now. I personally stated my concerns to the Attorney General and the Secretary of State on numerous occasions and in many forms—written questions, oral questions and through my duties on the Select Committee on Justice. My colleagues and I are yet to receive answers containing any kind of substance. For that reason, I am delighted to secure this Westminster Hall debate.

Our position, and the crux of this debate, is predicated on a sound legal assertion that human rights are devolved to Scotland, and not something on which this place can legislate for Scotland. The legal basis for that assertion is the Scotland Act 1998, which is in effect the Scottish Parliament’s constitution. We argue that it is as close to a written constitution as Scotland can acquire at present.

I will take this opportunity to explain exactly why, in legal terms, we believe that human rights are devolved to Scotland. Before I do that, I ask the Minister in his response to save us from the message repeated ad nauseam that he believes in human rights but that he just has a problem with their interpretation by the European Courts. We understand that point. I do not seek a debate on the rights and wrongs of human rights constituted here or in Europe; I want a debate surrounding the legalities of any action this Government could take on human rights and how that affects Scotland. If he fails to give those answers in clear terms, I will write to allow him an opportunity to consider his response further so that the issue of human rights in Scotland can be clarified and this damaging uncertainty on our citizens’ protection can end.

I will outline the legal basis for my argument. The Scotland Act does not specify which powers are devolved to Scotland; that is simply not how our constitutional settlement works. Schedule 5 to the Act actually lists the powers reserved to the Westminster Parliament, with the rest—de facto—being devolved to Scotland. So, for any matter to be reserved to the UK, it must—simply must—be listed within schedule 5 to the Act.

I certainly hope that the Minister is aware that human rights are not listed in any form within schedule 5 to the Act, meaning that they are—as a matter of fact and of constitutional law—devolved in their entirety to Scotland.

I also assume that he is acutely aware that any attempt by this place to legislate on schedule 5 will require—again, as a matter of constitutional law—the explicit consent of the Scottish Parliament, through a legislative consent motion under the Sewel convention, and that convention has arguably been strengthened by the Scotland Bill that is making its way through this place.

Consequently, my next request of the Minister is this: can he please confirm, in clear terms, whether the UK Government agree with this analysis? It is essential that we put this matter to bed, once and for all, so that we all understand that human rights are indeed devolved to Scotland.

The UK Government have various proposals—mooted proposals—on the table. One of those is the potential withdrawal from the European convention on human rights. The rights contained within the ECHR are enshrined in the Scotland Act, in section 57, meaning that the Scottish Parliament cannot do anything contrary to convention rights contained within the ECHR, essentially enshrining those rights in the Scotland Act. Section 57 of the Act combines with schedule 5 to the Act to mean that no UK Government can remove section 57, meaning that the ECHR—even if the UK removes itself from its effect—will always apply to devolved issues in Scotland.

So my next question to the Minister is this: do he and the UK Government accept that even if they withdraw from the ECHR, they cannot remove section 57 from the Scotland Act, meaning that the ECHR will continue to have an effect on devolved matters?

I am very proud of the UK’s role in the creation of the ECHR and we should never forget the reason it was established in the first place—to prevent the atrocities of 1914-18 and 1939-45 from ever happening again. In my view, we fragment the ECHR at our peril; it sets out minimum standards. So I often ponder why we would even moot removing ourselves from those standards, unless—in effect—we wanted to dilute them.

The repeal of the Human Rights Act 1998 has often been mooted by the Government. Schedule 4 to the Scotland Act contains a list of Acts that the Scottish Parliament is deemed not capable of repealing or amending. It includes, most obviously and in my opinion regrettably, the Act of Union. The Human Rights Act 1998 is also listed in schedule 4 to the Scotland Act, and as a measure of comfort—or, indeed, otherwise—to the Government, I can assure the Minister that Scotland will continue to comply with schedule 4, as she has absolutely no plans to repeal the Human Rights Act or indeed the Act of Union. We understand that it would be ultra vires to do so.

If we combine schedule 4 to the Scotland Act with schedule 5, it is clear that the UK Government cannot repeal the Human Rights Act from effect in Scotland. If the UK Government did so, they would require a legislative consent motion from the Scottish Parliament, and I do not think that any Scottish Government of any party of any colour would agree to that. Nevertheless, if the Human Rights Act is considered capable of being repealed in Scotland by Westminster, the Scottish Parliament could easily legislate to enact our own Human Rights Act, which I stress would not be a desirable outcome, as we could not insist that any new Act passed in Holyrood could cover reserved matters. The Human Rights Act provides important protection to Scottish citizens in relation to the laws passed on reserved matters in this place.

It is also worth pointing out that the Human Rights Act merely ensures that the convention rights are applied by the UK courts. Perhaps that is why it attracted cross-party support in the 1998s; it was hardly controversial then, and in my view it remains uncontroversial in Scotland.
This Government have not only mooted repeal of the Human Rights Act and withdrawal from the ECHR but they have made clear their ambition for a British Bill of Rights. Although I accept that nothing of that kind has been published yet, a British Bill of Rights was a manifesto pledge and we expect it to come to the Floor of the House at some point during this Parliament. So my next question to the Minister is this, and it is a question that my party has asked many times since May: will any proposed British Bill of Rights apply to Scotland? The name would suggest that it would be intended to cover Scotland. However, our position—founded on schedule 5 to the Scotland Act—is that, as a matter of constitutional law, the UK Government cannot impose a British Bill of Rights on Scotland without a legislative consent motion under the Sewel convention, which we believe would be withheld.

Hopefully I have made it clear that, in our view, human rights are devolved to Scotland. Of course, the Scottish Parliament could legislate for a Scottish Bill of Rights, but it has absolutely no plans to do so. As yet, we have no idea what a British Bill of Rights would contain, but no one can seriously believe that this UK Government would take the opportunity within that process to strengthen our citizens’ protections.

The protections of the ECHR and the Human Rights Act are hugely important to our citizens: the right to life; the right not to be enslaved; the right to liberty and security of the person; the right to a fair trial; and the right to marry, to name but a few. As Lord Bingham memorably said in 2009:

"Which of these rights…would we wish to discard? Are any of them trivial, superfluous, unnecessary?"

We say that none of them are. We view the convention not as a ceiling but as a baseline—a minimum. We should be building on these rights and not diluting them. Indeed, Scotland can go further if she so wishes. Repeal of, or withdrawal from, the ECHR would not strike a blow to lawyers, criminals or ambulance chasers; it would strike a blow to the poor, the vulnerable and the dispossessed. Scotland wants to increase our citizens’ protections. We want to put human rights at the heart of our domestic policy, as we pledged to do in our national action plan on human rights, which the Scottish National party Government launched a couple of years ago. For example, our dementia strategy in Scotland is based on agreed rights for patients, including the right to have access to treatment, and the right to have dignity and respect. We see this process as the way forward—strengthening our citizens’ rights, because we are here as lawmakers essentially to protect the citizens who put us here.

My view is that we would look rather insular to our partners in the wider world if we repealed or withdrew from the ECHR. When most countries in Europe have adopted the ECHR, what message would it send out to the world if we withdrew from it or repealed it, and diluted our citizens’ protections? It would be a sad day indeed for the UK’s reputation abroad.

I look forward to the sovereign people of Scotland coming together to draft a written constitution for Scotland, enshrining these rights forever in a future independent Scotland.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) for securing this very important debate.

Last December, I had the great pleasure of tabling an early-day motion to recognise Human Rights Day 2015. As a lifelong advocate of human rights, one of the great privileges of being an elected Member is now being in a position to effectively defend them, and they do need defending, as they are under attack from the current Government. They will say that this piece of legislation—the Human Rights Act—is not one and the same as our actual rights and that the reaction to their plans has been overblown. I say that is nonsense. Plans to scrap the Human Rights Act are no less than a full-on assault on the rights that I hold dear. The dismissiveness of the Government betrays the seriousness of the implications of their plans. It is a decade since the Prime Minister set up a panel of legal experts to draw up a British Bill of Rights to replace the Human Rights Act. Ten years on and that plan is still met with the fiercest opposition. Ten years down the line, the Tories are still unable to spin their plans as favourable, useful or in any way feasible.

It is important to remember that the Human Rights Act received cross-party support back in 1998. It is just as important that the Prime Minister’s plans do not even have the full support of his own Back Benchers, let alone Members from other parties.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Is my hon. Friend aware that the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights visited the UK in January and said:

"My impression is that the debate over the HRA in Westminster is not a true reflection of concerns outside England”?

With regard to the position in Scotland, does she agree with the Commissioner’s statement?

Margaret Ferrier: Yes, I totally agree with that statement. It is important, not only in England and Scotland but worldwide, that we support human rights and hold firm our thoughts on how important they are.

The tenacity of the Prime Minister in pursuing this wholly unpopular and unnecessary move is deeply unsettling. Like a hunting dog with a scent, he simply will not accept defeat. One wonders precisely what the motivation behind that staunch attitude is. After all, the plans are not only appalling, but risk a complete constitutional change and crisis in the UK.

Human rights are not reserved, and it is not conceivable that the Human Rights Act could be scrapped without legislative consent from the Scottish Parliament. I am proud that the Scottish National party will stand up to the Tories and will not buckle over our fundamental rights. I stood for election under the party promise that we were “Stronger for Scotland”. For me, our steadfast and unyielding opposition to this attack on human rights is our motto in practice. People in Scotland want a strong voice standing up to the unscrupulous attacks on our rights and core values, and that is what we are providing. Human rights are not Scottish, English, Welsh or Northern Irish—they are not American or
Australian for that matter. Human rights are universal, and we will not stand by and allow them to be diluted wherever they face threat. Repealing the provisions of the Human Rights Act would be nothing short of a colossal misjudgment, as it would remove important protections for people in the UK.

It is important to point out that the Human Rights Act did not give any new rights to UK citizens when it became law in 1998. It ensured that convention rights could be interpreted and considered by courts here in the UK. The UK was one of the first states to ratify the European convention on human rights. It is only right and proper that those rights are upheld in British courts, without the need to take cases to the European Court of Human Rights, if we are still in Europe. Justice should be accessible, yet just as we have seen with the introduction of tribunal fees, the Tories seem hellbent on making it as prohibitive as possible, particularly for those on low incomes. Human rights are centred on fairness for all of us. Removing access to justice, or at least making it much more difficult for vulnerable people, is itself an attack on our rights. What does that say to the rest of the world? What message does it send if we are unwilling to stand up to regimes such as that in the Saudi Kingdom, and instead pour our efforts into degrading our own protections?

My early-day motion called on the Government to work constructively with other Governments to promote the universality of human rights. The convention on human rights remains as much the shining beacon of human achievement that it was decades ago when Winston Churchill was championing it. I want to see human rights protected not only in Scotland, but across the UK and beyond. I want to see our human rights strengthened, not diminished. I want to see fairness at the core of everything we do as legislators. We can only do that if we stand up against these plans, loudly and clearly, and say no.

4.43 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) on obtaining this debate. I apologise for being a little late, but I caught up during the latter stages of his contribution. I was interested to hear the speech by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), who dealt with the threat posed by the discussion that is clearly going on within Government on the future of the Human Rights Act. I was interested to hear the speech by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), who dealt with the threat posed by the discussion that is clearly going on within Government on the future of the Human Rights Act 1998. Without disagreeing with what she said, this is a moment where we might stop and take stock. If the worst predictions of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West were to come true, the Human Rights Act were repealed, that would not deprive us of the convention rights; it would just make them that much more important for the moment, because we have never heard much by way of progress, although perhaps the Minister will have something to tell us today—I am happy to engage with them on the basis of broadening and strengthening the human rights covered by the Human Rights Act.

At this stage, it is useful to remember the history of the debate that brought us to where we are today. Essentially, the creation of the Human Rights Act and the terms in which it was introduced were something of a fudge. Throughout the 1990s and back into the 1980s—and possibly before that, for all I know—there was ongoing and substantial debate about the creation of a British Bill of Rights. I say that it was a fudge because the creation of a Bill in the terms that were discussed would have brought with it a fairly substantial challenge to the conventional Diceyan view of parliamentary sovereignty and the sovereignty of this place.

The justiciability of decisions taken by Government and Parliament was something that Tony Blair just did not have the stomach for taking on, even in the early years of the 1997 Government. For that reason, he came forward with a fudge, albeit an elegant one. It compelled courts to bring consideration of convention rights in an immediate way that meant that citizens did not have to go through the whole rigmarole of taking things to the European Court of Human Rights. Indeed, it has worked well ever since. In the time since the Human Rights Act was introduced, we have seen a substantial revision of the Diceyan view of parliamentary sovereignty. If we were to start with a Bill of Rights today, it would not scare the horses in the way that it clearly scared Tony Blair back in the late 1990s.

Joanna Cherry: Like me, the right hon. Gentleman is a Scots lawyer. Does he agree that the Diceyan view of the sovereignty of Parliament is very much a doctrine of English constitutional law? In Scottish constitutional law, there is a very strong foundation, recently reiterated by Lord Hope in the Supreme Court, in Jackson v. Attorney General, that the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty is an English doctrine and that in Scotland the people are sovereign.

Mr Carmichael: That was a debate that we enjoyed in the 1990s—I say “enjoyed”, but I use the word in the loosest possible sense—in the days of the constitutional convention. It was the underpinning of the claim of right that led to the Scottish Parliament being founded. There is a fairly long pedigree of jurisprudence in Scots law. Dredging my memory of the days of constitutional law, I go back to the case of MacCormick v. Lord Advocate, where that view was well-founded, albeit in obiter dictum.

The opportunity is there for something more to be done with human rights and a new Bill of Rights that would build on the Act that we currently enjoy. I hope the Minister would be open to that. More important and more fundamental to me than the Human Rights Act is that this country should remain a party to the European convention on human rights. If the worst predictions of the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West were to come true and the Human Rights Act were repealed, that would not deprive us of the convention rights; it would just make them that much more important.
more inaccessible. It would take us back to the situation we had before the 1998 Act, when citizens could access their convention rights, but it ultimately required going all the way to the European Court of Human Rights. That would be a genuine retrograde step.

To pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway, that would also put us in rather poor company. In fact, leaving the convention on human rights would leave the United Kingdom sitting—I hope rather uncomfortably—with Belarus.

**Richard Arkless:** The right hon. Gentleman is putting a typically articulate view. What is his view on the potential legalities and problems that the UK Government might have in either an imposition of the British Bill of Rights, repeal of the Human Rights Act, or withdrawal from the ECHR? That is what I would like the debate to focus on.

**Mr Carmichael:** To take each point in turn, the imposition of a British Bill of Rights would require an Act of Parliament. If that were to extend and build on convention rights, and if it were not in contravention or conflict with convention rights, I would see no difficulty with that. If we were to seek to withdraw from the convention, that would bring with it enormous problems. It would bring the political problems that I have already touched on and would put us in the company of nations that, frankly, I do not want to find myself with. Beyond that, it would put us in breach of treaty obligations, because the convention rights are built into the Good Friday agreement, which, above all else, is a treaty between ourselves and Ireland. It would also throw our own constitutional structure into disarray, because the Human Rights Act is hardwired into the devolution settlement in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Again, this is one of those things that was probably not given consideration when the Conservatives set up their commission 10 years ago. That probably explains the fact that this seems to have landed in a pile of things in the Ministry labelled “a bit too difficult to deal with; we'll maybe look at it next month”.

**Richard Arkless:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his answer. He makes the position clear from a UK point of view, but I am interested in his view on whether a potential imposition of a British Bill of Rights would require a legislative consent motion from the Scottish Parliament and whether, in his view, that consent is likely to be given by any party of any colour or any Government in Scotland?

**Mr Carmichael:** We would have to see what the terms of the Bill were before deciding whether it required legislative consent. There are a lot of social and economic rights where the Bill would of course cut across devolved areas and would need a legislative consent motion. Employment rights, for example, are clearly reserved. We would need to see what the terms were. Like all such changes—if I can expand the thought for a second—these things are based on building consensus before introducing a Bill, so that everybody knows exactly what it will cover. I am talking about my fantasy Bill of Rights and the things I would like to have in it, which are not reflected much in a great deal of what we have heard from the thinking of the Government. However, I am ever the optimist, so we do not know what we might we get from them.

If we were to get a Bill of Rights that built on the convention rights, did not interfere with them and left us still a party to the European convention, I think that would be well received in Scotland. I would be disappointed to think that, just because such a Bill had been initiated here in Westminster, it would not be accepted by people in Scotland. The protection of human rights has been reserved broadly since the days of devolution, and people in Scotland would still respect that, having voted to remain part of the United Kingdom.

I shall be interested to hear what the Minister has to say. The last time we went round this course in Westminster Hall, he assured us that we would be hearing more. We have not heard quite as much as I had hoped we would; we have heard just as much as I thought we might. We shall wait to hear what he has to say. I hope that at some point we will get the answers to how the Government are going to get out of the hole they have been digging for themselves, in terms of the constitutional difficulties that any repeal of the Human Rights Act would bring.

4.55 pm

**Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Main.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless), who secured this debate, made it clear that he specifically wanted to talk about legalities. He has argued that human rights are integral to the devolution settlement, and he referred to the fact that the European convention on human rights is written into the Scotland Act 1998 in sections 29 and 57, which provide that the Scottish Parliament cannot pass any legislation that is contrary to any of the convention rights, and a Scottish Minister or a Member of the Scottish Government cannot pass legislation or carry out any act that is contrary to convention rights. Neither of those sections would be changed by a simple repeal of the Human Rights Act, because they are part of the Scotland Act.

My hon. Friend also made the point that if we look at the scheme of devolution that was devised by the late Donald Dewar, who was the first ever First Minister of Scotland, his plan was simple and, in my view, to be lauded: everything would be devolved unless it was specifically reserved. We find in schedule 5 of the Scotland Act a list of the matters that are specifically reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament, but one will search in vain for any mention of human rights in schedule 5, so in my respectful submission it is not correct to say that human rights are a reserved matter. They are a devolved matter. My hon. Friend asked the Minister to confirm whether he agrees that, as a matter of statutory interpretation, human rights are not reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament.

It must be recognised squarely that in terms of schedule 4, the Human Rights Act cannot be modified or repealed by the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish National party and the Scottish Government accept that. However, we argue, as my hon. Friend did, that because human rights are not reserved in terms of the Scotland Act, if the British Parliament wants to repeal the Human Rights Act and replace it with a British Bill of Rights, it will be legislating in the field of human rights, and under the Sewel convention it must seek the legislative consent of the Scottish Parliament. Hopefully, by the time we get to that stage, the Sewel convention will be on a statutory footing as proposed in clause 2 of the Scotland Bill.
I reiterate my hon. Friend’s question to the Minister: does he accept that for repeal of the Human Rights Act, and for repeal of anything in the Scotland Act, a legislative consent motion would be required from the Scottish Parliament? Also, does he appreciate that as recently as the end of 2014, more than 100 Members of the Scottish Parliament indicated that they supported the Human Rights Act? A cross-party majority was in support. Is he also aware that the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, has made it very clear that her Government, which has a majority in the Scottish Parliament, would never support repeal? So does he accept that, with regard to the future framework for human rights not only in Scotland but across the UK, the British Government could not repeal the Human Rights Act and replace it with a British Bill of Rights without the consent of the Scottish Parliament and that that is extremely likely to be withheld? The third question that my hon. Friend posed was the question of whether the British Bill of Rights will apply to Scotland. If it is going to apply to Scotland, does the Minister accept that there would have to be a legislative consent motion?

The First Minister of Scotland has been keen to emphasise on several occasions that she wants to preserve the Human Rights Act for the whole of the United Kingdom, not just for Scotland. There is no question of the Scottish Government doing a deal whereby Scotland would get out of the repeal of the Human Rights Act and leave the rest of our partner nations in the United Kingdom swinging in the wind. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) stressed the universality of human rights, and the First Minister of Scotland has argued that it is important they are kept for the whole of the United Kingdom, so it is not the intention of the Scottish National party or the Scottish Government to do any deal. We would like to be involved in the cross-party movement to keep human rights for the whole of the United Kingdom.

That feeds into another point made by both my hon. Friends. The repeal of the Human Rights Act would send out completely the wrong message to the world about the United Kingdom’s direction of travel on human rights. It is striking to look at the testimony of Hossam Bahgat, the director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. He was involved in the Tahrir square uprising five years ago and said:

“The most important thing that the British can do to support human rights in Egypt is to support human rights in the United Kingdom...It is significantly more difficult for us to fight for human rights in Egypt as a consequence of the direction of travel that they are giving.”

To his great credit, the former Attorney General, the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), made a similar point when he recently highlighted the fact that Russia is already using the UK’s position on human rights to delay implementing European Court judgments and that the UK is being cited by countries such as Venezuela as justification for ignoring obligations under the American convention on human rights.

When the right hon. and learned Gentleman spoke in Edinburgh last September, he described the ECHR as “arguably the single most important legal and political instrument for promoting human rights on our planet.” He has previously stated that if the UK is “instrumental in damaging its effectiveness it will sit very strangely with our settled policy of promoting human rights globally.”

That is a voice from the Minister’s party supporting the notion that it would be unfortunate if Britain sent out the wrong message about our support for human rights.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: I very much agree with the hon. and learned Lady on the question of universality. When I went to Cameroon a few years ago to work on a Voluntary Service Overseas-funded project that provided legal aid to people who could not afford it, I was struck by the fact that when I went into lawyers’ offices and courts, there was the universal declaration of human rights. We always think of it as being quite high-flown and possibly even overblown, but they rely on it in courts of first instance. Does the hon. and learned Lady agree that the Human Rights Act need not be the last word in human rights? Legislation could be introduced in several areas to give protection that is more contemporarily relevant than that envisaged in the 1950s.

Joanna Cherry: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway indicated, the Scottish Government are already attempting to hard-wire human rights into all their social policy—not only the human rights enshrined in the ECHR, but social and economic rights. For example, the Scottish Government have made it clear that when they have the additional powers they hope to get to develop a social security system for Scotland, respect for the dignity of the individual will be at the heart of the system. We are keen to move the human rights debate on in Scotland, which is why the Scottish Government brought in Scotland’s national action plan for human rights. When the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights visited Scotland in January, he singled out the national action plan for support.

I totally agree with the right hon. Gentleman that socioeconomic rights are important. Many other countries in the world recognise that and have such rights in their written constitutions. The constitution of the new Republic of South Africa, which was drafted, at least in part, by one of the finest lawyers on the planet still living, Albie Sachs, recognises the importance of socioeconomic rights, which are embedded in it. Some of the Nordic states’ constitutions also embed socioeconomic rights. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway said, it is our hope that when we become independent we will have a constitutional convention to write a constitution for an independent Scotland. We will look at the models and examples of other forward-looking democracies—not only in the west, but including examples such as South Africa—and seek to write socioeconomic rights into our constitution.

There is universal recognition among all those who have spoken so far of the importance and universality of human rights. We are of one voice, across the SNP-Lib Dem divide, in saying that socioeconomic rights are important and that the rights in the ECHR are only a floor for human rights, not a ceiling. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) expressed the hope that the currently proposed consultation might be brought forward and might look at socioeconomic rights. I am far less of an optimist than he is. All the noises I have heard coming from the Government Benches
have suggested that it will be an exercise in reducing rather than bolstering human rights protections. Regardless of the purpose of the exercise, do the Government accept that human rights are devolved, not reserved, and that the legislative consent of the Scottish Parliament must be sought before there is any interference in the human rights regime that effects Scotland?

5.5 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I, too, commend the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) for securing this important debate. For him and for you, Mrs Main, these are obviously fresh and interesting developments, but for the rest of us there is an element of groundhog day. The Minister, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and I were present on 30 June last year for what I think was the previous human rights debate in Westminster Hall, which was secured by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). One would have thought that in eight months we might have moved on somewhat, but we have not moved far at all.

First, I shall explain what we now know that we did not know then, and then I shall outline what we still do not know. The hon. and learned Lady made essentially the same point as she made in the previous debate:

“Ministers...suggest that they believe that the UK Government could repeal the Human Rights Act without reference to the Scottish Parliament. They argue that the Sewel convention would not be engaged because human rights are a reserved matter. That is wrong and legally illiterate. Human rights are not a reserved matter. That could repeal the Human Rights Act without reference to the Scottish Parliament. They argue that the Sewel convention would not be engaged because human rights are a reserved matter. That is wrong and legally illiterate. Human rights are not a reserved matter and are not listed as such in schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998.”—[Official Report, 30 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 424WH.]

I do not have the benefit of the expert legal advice that the Government have to enable me to comment on that—I am not sure whether Minister himself does these days, as he and the Lord Chancellor are in that interesting lacuna in which theouters currently find themselves—but I can at least say that this is a hotly debated matter. This is one of the most intractable issues in which the Government have engaged in since beginning this rather sorry and unwise attempt to unravel the Human Rights Act, which was introduced by the last Labour Government.

If nothing else, the Lord Chancellor is candid and answers questions as honestly as he can. When called upon to give answers about this matter, he struggled and said that it was still under review. That is probably right. Given the proximity of the Scottish Parliament elections, there is an additional problem: we will shortly be entering a period of purdah. The former leader of the Labour party, now Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), wrote to the Lord Chancellor asking him to confirm that “no part of the consultation period will overlap with the period where purdah applies or the Scottish Parliament will be dissolved”.

The response simply said that the Lord Chancellor will “adhere to any Cabinet Office guidance”.

Can the Minister shed some more light on those matters? It might not be important now as it does not look like there will be any movement before the Scottish Parliament elections or, indeed, the EU referendum. Nevertheless, I would appreciate some clarity. If the positions of the devolved authorities—not only the Scottish Parliament but the Northern Ireland Assembly—are going to be significant in any legislation that is drafted, there will need to be a full consultation, which cannot be done properly during a period of purdah.

Let me throw one other thing into the mix. The Scottish Conservative general election manifesto—a rather recherché document that I am not sure we are all terribly familiar with—said:


The Minister may wish to clarify the Government’s attitude to the European convention on human rights. From what both he and the Lord Chancellor have said recently, it is pretty clear that they now do not envisage our withdrawing from the convention, but that is always hedged with the phrase, “Nothing is ruled in and nothing is ruled out.” It would be helpful if the Minister ruled that out, because that would remove one of the major problems that we face.

That is the territory we are in and those are the questions that we can glean answers to. Although it is always valuable to run these issues around the Chamber again, until the Government actually bring something forward, we are all stumbling around in the dark.

Mr Carmichael: I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about the timetabling. It is unlikely that we will see anything this side of the purdah period for the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish elections. It is impossible at this stage to consult with the Administrations in any of the devolved regions before the elections. However, it would be exceptionally unwise thereafter to start a consultation in the middle of the referendum campaign. This discussion is best conducted in a period of relative calm and stability. I fear that the period between 6 May and 23 June is not going to be—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Interventions are getting rather long and are not in the form of questions.

Andy Slaughter: I apologise on behalf of the legal profession. Once we get going, it is difficult for us to stop.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. This will probably be my last or my last but one point, so the Minister has time to respond. If nothing else, we must have some clarity on the timetabling. I remind the Minister, although I am sure he engraved these milestones, that the Conservative manifesto said:

“We will...scrap the Human Rights Act and curtail the role of the European Court of Human Rights”.

Last year, the Prime Minister, writing in no less a paper than The Sun, said that it is “one of the first tasks I set the new Justice Secretary”.

In May 2015, the Minister said:

“The Government will consult fully on its proposals for a Bill of Rights during this session.”

From what we read today in the papers, it may well be that the Prime Minister gets round that by simply extending the Session and pushing the Queen’s Speech back. Nevertheless, we need certainty.
Nothing could be clearer than what the Minister said in Justice questions on 8 September 2015:

“We will bring forward proposals on a Bill of Rights this autumn. They will be subject to full consultation. The preparation is going well.”—[Official Report, 8 September 2015; Vol. 599, c. 205.]

The Lord Chancellor modified that on 2 December 2015, when he said:

“My original intention was to publish the consultation before Christmas. It has now been put back. I expect it will be produced in the New Year.”

I think we can say that we are quite firmly in the new year now. It would be helpful if the Minister to give some clarity, because I am reliant on another authoritative source—The Mail on Sunday—which told us at the weekend that the Bill has been put off indefinitely to avoid an explosive new row over Europe. Specifically, it said that the work “has now been completed by Justice Secretary…and is sitting on a desk inside No 10… Downing Street is refusing to publish the legislation, they say. Insiders believe the explanation is Mr Gove’s decision to defect to the Out camp in the referendum.”

We know that there are political difficulties for the Government, which may be why it has been convenient to postpone what seems to be the entire Parliament’s business, including the Queen’s Speech, until after the referendum. It would just be nice to be told that in terms.

Two weeks ago, we were told that there will be a sovereignty Bill, possibly published this week. What has happened to that? How does it relate to reform of the Human Rights Act? It may be that the boat has sailed and that, because the people whom the Prime Minister wished to keep within the tent—including the Minister—are already outside the tent, there is not much point in introducing a sovereignty Bill. It is extraordinary that we talked for so long about the European Court of Human Rights and the European convention on human rights, but we barely hear them mentioned now. Everything is about the European Court of Justice. I wonder whether it was just the words “human rights” that caused difficulty for some Government Back Benchers, and that in the hothouse atmosphere of the European Union referendum debate the caravan has moved on. That is no way to run a Government. If nothing else, I ask the Minister to give us some clarity on whether we are going to have a proposal, so when we next debate this matter we can have a substantive debate rather than run around the houses.

Let me end on this point. Although the have been some comic—or tragicomic—aspects to how the Government have handled this matter, in essence it is extremely serious. Other speakers talked about the universality of human rights and the importance of giving effect to international law and human rights in our domestic courts. That is not something to trifle with and it should not fall prey to internal disputes within a political party, even if it is the governing party.

I remind the Minister of what the director of Amnesty International said last week when its report was published—it is a shame that Amnesty needs to remind the Government of their duties on this matter—

“The UK is setting a dangerous precedent to the world on human rights. There’s no doubt that the downgrading of human rights by this government is a gift to dictators the world over and fatally undermines our ability to call on other countries to uphold rights and laws. People around the world are still fighting to get basic human rights and we should not let politicians take our hard-won rights away with the stroke of a pen.”

I know that the Minister is a sensible, intelligent man, and I hope he takes those comments on board and is not swayed by the passions of Europe, pro or anti.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): It is an honour and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, for the first time. I think. We have stood shoulder to shoulder on many issues and you have steered us wisely through this debate.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) on securing the debate, and other hon. Members on their stimulating contributions. In particular, I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for sharing his fantasy of a British Bill of Rights with us. The serious point that he made is that the Human Rights Act is not the last word on human rights: it is not the perfect incarnation of human rights in this country, and therefore it can admit of change. I sensed agreement on that point, so the real bone of contention is what that change might look like, rather than the principled question of whether the Human Rights Act has become untouchable.

The Government are fully committed to the protection of human rights across the UK. This debate is an important opportunity to reflect on what that protection looks like now, what it might look like in the future and how it might be improved. The Prime Minister made it clear that the Government will work in the interests of all four nations of the UK, and it goes without saying that I share that commitment. One of the things that unites us as a country is our shared commitment to liberty and the rule of law. Although that commitment has evolved though different instruments, from Magna Carta and the 1689 Bill of Rights in England and Wales, to the Scottish Claim of Right, the nations of the UK have evolved with a shared commitment to the common values that underpin human rights and, indeed, the Union.

As an Englishman, I am proud to pay tribute to the Scottish landmarks on Britain’s long road to liberty. I mentioned the Claim of Right, to which can be added the Criminal Procedure Act 1701, which established and entrenched the principle of habeas corpus in Scots law. Scotland has produced some of our very finest thinkers on the subject of liberty and the rule of law. I would single out David Hume and his essays on the liberty of the press and civil liberty. He regarded Government not as the enemy of liberty but as a necessary condition for liberty. As hon. and right hon. Members will know, his work came in the context of the period after the Act of Union, so it was part of the intellectual fabric that binds this United Kingdom.

We share not only the values, but the things that emanate from them—the practical products of a commitment to liberty, such as free elections, a ban on cruel and unusual punishment, free and fair trials, and free speech. Those values and their product found voice and strength in Scotland as in the rest of the United Kingdom and are shared across the UK. At the same time, we must reflect on the pluralism within the UK and that the UK is a union of diverse interests, history and legal traditions.
Notwithstanding our shared commitment to rights and liberty, there are areas where we diverge. We can look, for example, to the right to trial by jury that exists in England and Wales. Jury trial is practised in Scotland, but it is not there as a strict right, which is perfectly legitimate and respectable. There is room for different applications of fundamental freedoms across the UK. That diversity is not merely to be expected; it is to be welcomed. It would be odd were the SNP, which is effectively committed to secession, not to think that that pluralism was a good idea.

**Joanna Cherry:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Raab:** I will just make a little progress and then I will certainly take interventions.

The balance between shared values and the different application of those values finds voice today in Scotland’s human rights framework. The protection of rights and liberty remains at the heart of Scotland’s devolution settlement—a point made well by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway. The compatibility of devolved legislation with fundamental human rights is central to the competence of the Scottish Parliament. While competence for the UK’s human rights framework remains with the UK Government and this House, the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government are responsible for the application of human rights in devolved areas and are free to act on human rights issues within devolved policy areas. The core substantive rights are common across the UK, but we have an element of pluralism in our approach to the procedural mechanism for protecting human rights. That variable procedural geometry means that the application of human rights admits some measure of variation across the UK.

We had lots of theoretical considerations of the human rights position as it applies in the UK and in Scotland, but let us discuss some tangible illustrations. Unlike in England and Wales, for example, the Scottish Government do not provide for mandatory fatal accident inquiries for unnatural deaths of persons detained under mental health laws, despite some criticism from the Scottish Human Rights Commission. Another example is the hourly roasting of detainees in police cells, which takes place in Scotland but applies only to vulnerable detainees in England. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary in Scotland recommended reform in that area. A third example—again, this list is illustrative, not exhaustive—is the notification period for demonstrations in Scotland, which is 28 days compared with six days in England. That has been the subject of criticism by the UN’s special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. It is also highlighted in “Is Scotland Fairer?” the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s latest report, along with other areas that the commission concluded required improvement, such as violence and harassment against children and young persons and hate crimes perpetrated on grounds of disability or sexual orientation.

I should make it clear that the Government support the principle that Scotland should have the freedom to take action on rights in devolved areas, in line with its own priorities for implementation, and to decide how it balances fundamental human rights with the need to implement practical and sensible policies for the people of Scotland.

**Joanna Cherry:** I mentioned earlier that the Council of Europe’s commissioner for human rights recently visited the UK. Is the Minister aware that the commissioner complimented the Scottish Government on the fact that they are looking to go beyond the European convention on human rights by implementing other international human rights treaties directly into Scots law? Is the Minister aware that the commissioner also said: “The Scottish National Action Plan for Human Rights is also a good example for”

the rest of the United Kingdom?

**Mr Raab:** I read the remarks of the commissioner. Indeed, I met him in person and he seemed satisfied with the assurances I gave him that our reforms, proposals and what we have in mind will not see us turn into the basket case of Europe or become like Belarus, which is nonsense that is bandied around frankly rather irresponsibly. I did meet the commissioner and did read his comments about Scotland, and it is right to pay tribute to the improvements and to what the rest of the Union can learn from Scotland. Action plans and the theoretical stuff is fine, but it is what we do in practice that really counts for the citizens of Scotland and indeed the rest of the UK.

In addition, the more powers that the Scottish Government assume for the implementation of human rights for the people of Scotland, the more they can be expected to be questioned and evaluated on the degree to which they live up to the responsibilities that they acquire. We hear an awful lot from the SNP in this House about how the UK Government and Parliament are threatening human rights in Scotland, but I hope that that is not being used as a distraction from considering the degree to which the Scottish Government meet their commitments in reality in Scotland. It is not about brandishing action plans, to which the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway referred, and making pious policy statements about human rights in theory instead of focusing on delivering in practice. Perhaps the hon. and learned Lady would like to respond to that point.

**Joanna Cherry:** I would not, because the Minister is here to answer questions put to him by us in this debate. I am conscious of the clock and that there is about three and a half minutes left. He has been asked a number of questions by my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) that he has not yet answered. He has also been asked some important questions by the spokesperson for the official Opposition about the purdah period. Will the Minister answer those questions?

**Mr Raab:** I thank the hon. and learned Lady. We have given answers to all those questions before.

**Richard Arkless:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair):** Order. It is usually customary to let the Minister respond to the question being asked.

**Mr Raab:** I am happy to give way, but if we have a Gatling gun salvo of interventions, that rather eats into my time and opportunity to address such matters. I will, however, give way to the hon. Gentleman, as it is his debate.
Richard Arkless: The Minister says that the issues have been dealt with before. The question is simple: do the Government believe that human rights are reserved or devolved? He says that they have given the answer before. Where and when? We have never heard it.

Joanna Cherry: Tell us.

Richard Arkless: Tell us!

Mr Raab: We have made it clear that the Human Rights Act can be revised only by the UK Government, but the implementation of many human rights issues is devolved. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland neatly summed up the position on the Sewel convention and legislative consent motions. Scotland cannot responsibly take a decision on such things until it has its package. In relation to the European convention on human rights, which the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway also asked about, I do not know how many times I have said it in the House, but our current plans do not involve our withdrawal from the convention. If the hon. Gentleman has been in for Justice Question Time once over the past six months, he will have heard me say that.

In fact, the Scotland Bill, which is currently completing its passage in the other place, serves as a reminder of the Scottish Parliament’s role in deciding the right balance for Scottish people in Scotland. To take just one example, when competence for the franchise in local and Scottish parliamentary elections is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, it will be for the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government to determine whether the current ban on convicted prisoners voting ought to remain, as in the rest of the UK. The SNP has made it clear that it did not want the franchise extended to prisoners for the Scottish referendum. Nicola Sturgeon made that clear in May 2013.

Joanna Cherry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Raab: I will not because I have so little time left. Under the Human Rights Act, however, once Scotland has devolved responsibility for the franchise, the only way that the Scottish Government will be able to retain the ban on prisoner voting is by relying on the nationwide ban enacted by the UK Parliament here at Westminster. It is one of those things that SNP Members should remember, ‘fess up to and be a bit more honest and straightforward about when they hurl around the suggestion that we are attacking human rights.

There is actually widespread support in Scotland for replacing the Human Rights Act with a Bill of Rights, which has been borne out by all the YouGov polling.

Joanna Cherry: Nonsense!

Mr Raab: The hon. and learned Lady does not like the facts.

The truth is that the UK’s history of respect for human rights predates the Human Rights Act in all parts of the United Kingdom. That protection will continue to be totally central to our human rights framework in the years ahead. I look forward to many more opportunities to discuss the substance and detail of the framework with hon. Members in due course.

Question put,

That this House has considered the future framework for human rights in Scotland.

The Chair’s opinion as to the decision of the Question was challenged.

Question not decided (Standing Order No. 10(13)).
Westminster Hall

Thursday 3 March 2016

[MR CHARLES WALKER in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Offshore Oil and Gas Industry

1.30 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the offshore oil and gas industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, for this important debate. I am grateful to the hon. Members for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for the work they did in helping to secure it.

The North sea oil and gas industry is a significant employer in my constituency, with Lowestoft and its port being an important service centre. It is important to have this debate now as the industry faces major challenges that need to be addressed urgently. Further fiscal measures need to be introduced in the Budget on 16 March, and the debate provides us with an opportunity to consider what such measures should be as well as the industry’s longer term framework.

First, the industry must survive. We must then ensure that everything is done so that it can thrive. We owe that to those who work in what is in many respects a dangerous industry, to their families, to the communities from which they come and to those businesses who are making investment decisions in a risky and unpredictable market—particularly so at this time—to give it that sustainable and, I think, exciting future.

The oil and gas industry on the UK continental shelf faces serious challenges. It is fighting for its very existence and tens of thousands of people’s livelihoods are on the line. About 75,000 jobs have gone in the past 15 months, primarily due to the collapse in oil prices and the increasing maturity of the UKCS as an oil and gas producing basin. The industry is drowning in a tsunami of oil and gas supply just as demand is cratering around the world.

In mid-2014, oil was trading at in excess of $100 a barrel, but today the price is between $30 and $35 per barrel. At the beginning of the year the combined market value of 112 publicly traded oil companies—the entirety of the UK’s oil and gas industry excluding Shell, BP and GP—had the same value as Marks and Spencer: £7 billion. Two years ago, just one of those companies, Tullow Oil, was worth more than Marks and Spencer: it had a market value of £8.2 billion.

Oil & Gas UK’s recently published activities survey for last year confirms the serious nature of the situation. While production on the UKCS rose by 9.7% in 2015 to 1.64 million barrels of oil equivalent a day, revenues fell by 30% between 2014 and 2015 to £18.1 billion, and although the industry has been successful in achieving significant cost reductions and efficiency improvements, 43% of the UKCS oil fields are likely to be operating at a loss in 2016 at prevailing prices. Oil & Gas UK estimates that, in the southern North sea, 51 fields may cease production by 2020. That is a third of the fields in that area and equivalent to 51 factories closing their gates.

Oil and gas companies are cutting almost all of their discretionary expenditure to survive in a $30-a-barrel world. Intense global competition for capital and contraction in expenditure is leading to a major downturn in activity and subsequent job losses across the sector. There is concern that the situation will get worse over the coming year as companies in the supply chain complete contracts commissioned in better times and the insulation provided by price hedging taken out by many operators disappears. The industry is used to working with great uncertainty and risk, but with greater market volatility and lower prices likely to prevail for much longer augmented by the challenges of working in a mature basin, there is a need for a more robust framework. There is a moral imperative as well as a business imperative to manage the industry better.

Some might say that, with all those challenges, why does it matter? It really matters. The industry is vital to UK plc. Despite the job losses, 375,000 people are employed in the industry, its supply chain and ancillary service industries, with those jobs concentrated around Aberdeen, on Tyneside and Teesside, and in East Anglia around Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft. If we do nothing, in effect we will be hollowing out those communities.

There will also be a knock-on effect on other areas of the economy such as steel production in manufacturing and in the City, where oil and gas company shares figure prominently in many pension funds. The industry has also built an integrated supply chain that is the envy of the world, which produces exports worth an estimated £39 billion a year. We have great depths of knowledge and expertise built on decades of experience that we must nurture and cherish, not throw away.

In 2014, UK oil and gas provided 68% of the UK’s total primary energy and, in the same year, 45% of the oil we used came from the UKCS, 48% of natural gas came from UK natural gas production and the industry provided £2.2 billion in taxation to the Treasury, though that was the lowest figure for 20 years. The situation has deteriorated in the past 18 months, but, despite the serious challenges, the UK offshore oil and gas industry has a vital role to play in the next 30 years. There are numerous reasons for that.

First, energy security must be a priority for the nation. We need to be able to maximise production of oil and gas at home to reduce our dependency on imports in an increasingly uncertain world. Secondly, while 42 billion barrels of oil equivalent have been produced from the UKCS in the past 50 years, there are known reserves of 20 billion barrels of oil and gas to be recovered from our offshore waters. Of that, there are 8 billion barrels of natural gas. As the Secretary of State set out in her reset speech for energy policy in November, gas has a key role to play in keeping the lights on in the immediate future. Recovery of those reserves, and hopefully others, is a prize worth fighting for.

Thirdly, the Secretary of State in her reset speech also set out an exciting future for offshore wind, an industry that is bringing exciting opportunities to East Anglia. Offshore oil and gas in many respects complements
offshore wind because their supply chains overlap. The transition to a low-carbon economy will not take place overnight, and oil and gas production on the UKCS has a vital role to play in securing a smooth transition and helping to build another world-class industry of which Britain can be proud.

Fourthly, I do not wish to be unnecessarily negative about another technology, but we must be realistic about the role that onshore fracking will play in the immediate future. It will have to overcome planning hurdles, and it should be pointed out that in the US they have known about large tight gas fields since the 1930s. They are working those now because new technology has made that viable. In the UK, first we must establish the extent of those fields and then we must assess their full economic viability and establish the infrastructure to service them. We already have that infrastructure in the North sea, so it makes sense to make best use of it.

While the industry’s challenges have come into stark focus in the past 18 months as the price of oil has plummeted, its structural defects have been evident for some time. That is why the previous Secretary of State, Ed Davey, instructed Sir Ian Wood to conduct a review. Sir Ian published his findings in February 2014. They were endorsed across the industry and across this House, and form the basis of much of the Energy Bill. His main recommendations were to commit the industry to the principle of MER—maximising economic recovery from the UKCS—and, to achieve that, to create a new arm’s-length regulatory body to provide effective stewardship and regulation. That body is the Oil and Gas Authority, which is the cornerstone of a new strategy: a tripartite approach of industry, the OGA and Treasury working together. The OGA will provide the framework for that collaboration. The OGA will promote collaboration, which is vital to ensure that infrastructure is used and shared on a fair basis and that decommissioning takes place at the right time, not prematurely, which would undermine the objective of MER. The OGA will give greater security to those working in the industry.

Some might say that Sir Ian wrote his report in a different time, when the industry was not facing the acute challenges it is today, and that his recommendations are out of date. I disagree. The framework he recommends provides the industry with the best chance at survival and at realising its potential over the next 35 years. Time is of the essence, as Sir Ian stated in his report, and it is vital that the Energy Bill receives Royal Assent as soon as practically possible in the next few weeks.

Sir Ian stressed the importance of the industry collaborating. I will come back to that theme quite a lot over the next few minutes. It was a theme taken up by Deloitte in its recent publication, “Making the most of UKCS: Collaborating for success”, which highlighted that all too often in the past, collaboration in many oil and gas companies has been left to a few heroes—the few trusted individuals who

“actively look for opportunities to collaborate and ensure that their partners share the benefits.”

Deloitte points out that

“companies should do more to foster a collaborative environment through leadership, targeted strategies, allocated resources and personal objectives linked to rewards. Successful collaboration depends on encouraging workforce to focus on the end-result, sharing goals and empowering staff to accept compromise, rather than systems and processes.”

Deloitte adds that while there are good examples of collaboration, there are clearly opportunities for improvement for both operators and those in the supply chains, which should be doing more to

“improve financial incentives and contractual terms to encourage collaboration.”

It adds that

“operators especially need to improve in areas that foster innovation—such as seeking out new ideas and solutions, or implementing change effectively.”

It is vital that instead of a few individual heroes, there is a whole legion of them operating throughout the industry.

I will provide a quick comic interlude. On Saturday, on the eve of the Oscars ceremony, the actor George Kennedy died. He won an Oscar in 1967 for his role in “Cool Hand Luke”. For people of my generation, he was perhaps better known for what was a less challenging role in acting terms, playing Carter McKay in “Dallas”, in which he spent most of his time fighting with the Ewings for control of both Ewing Oil and WestStar Oil. While “Dallas” was glamorous fiction, it parodies what some people say the oil industry used to be about: aggressive competition and greed descending into criminality. Those days, if they ever existed, are long behind us.

The ethos that must be installed across the industry going forward is one of collaboration—collaboration between the OGA, industry and the Treasury, with the OGA providing the framework for that collaboration. We now have a regulator with the same bite as its counterparts in Norway and the Netherlands. That collaboration must involve industry, building on the significant progress it has made in the past year in reducing operating costs from an average $24.30 per barrel to $20.95 per barrel. Yesterday, at the Southern North Sea conference in Norwich, the ambition of reducing costs to $15 per barrel was stated. One operator, in what I should emphasise was very much an isolated case, explained how it was achieving costs of $7 per barrel.

In this tripartite approach, the Treasury needs to deliver its side of the bargain, providing a taxation framework that shows real confidence in the industry’s long-term future and helps to attract global footloose investment. However, collaboration must not stop there; it must permeate the industry and beyond. Operators must collaborate with operators. That is evidenced by the partnership currently being operated by Faroe Petroleum, Petrofac and Eni Hewett, about which I also heard yesterday.

Trade organisations must also collaborate with one another, which again was evidenced yesterday in Norwich by the signing of a memorandum of agreement between Oil & Gas UK and the East of England Energy Group. Operators must collaborate with their service providers, building long-term partnerships and learning lessons from other sectors such as the aviation and car industries. Small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the sector have a proven track record of driving innovation and achieving efficiencies. Operators now need to work with them.
Finally, the sector needs to work with other sectors, in particular the offshore wind sector, with which it has a great deal in common. The oil and gas industry post-Piper Alpha has a good track record of operating safely in what is a hazardous and dangerous environment. That must never be compromised, but one has to ask: is it necessary to have two separate regimes—one for the oil and gas industry, and one for the offshore wind industry? Going forward, collaboration must underpin everything. It is probably too late for the Budget in under two weeks’ time, but for the autumn statement, consideration should be given to introducing measures that encourage collaboration—for example, tax breaks and incentives to carry out seismic work that can lead to new discoveries.

Alongside the implementation of Sir Ian’s recommendations and the move towards a more collaborative approach to business, changes to the fiscal regime are imperative, not only to get over the immediate challenges the industry faces, but to provide a framework to attract global investment. That is already acknowledged by the Treasury. Its “Driving investment” plan, which came out in December 2014, recognised that substantial improvements in the oil and gas fiscal and regulatory landscape, including a reduction in the overall tax burden, are required for the UKCS to remain globally competitive and to attract international capital.

When the “Driving investment” plan was published, the oil price was around $60 a barrel. Given that the price is now in the range of $30 to $35 a barrel and that the observed impacts of prevailing low oil prices and the depth of the downturn in the UKCS are considerable, those improvements are even more imperative. There are huge pressures on company and project financing, and more job losses and company defaults are a real worry. Further fiscal measures are now required as a matter of urgency to support the industry, and I urge the Government to bring such measures forward in the forthcoming Budget.

The package included in the March 2015 Budget was very much welcomed by the industry and should now be the foundation for further measures. Such additional measures would also help the industry’s supply chain and therefore meet the second principle in the “Driving investment” plan: revenues. In setting further reforms, we must have in mind the requirements of the secondary industries. I would therefore be grateful if my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) and I are members, has developed a package of measures to provide advice and support to businesses and their workforce. The taskforce commissioned research that showed that 26 companies have filed for administration in the Lowestoft and Yarmouth area between April and October 2015 and more than 1,000 people directly employed—that is, directly employed in the regions in which we operate, for businesses and their representatives to talk to their banks, to explain their problems and to work with them. The feedback I am getting in East Anglia is that at the moment the banks are being responsible, but in other sectors in the past—whether it was the dairy or the house-building industry—when times have got difficult, the banks have sometimes panicked.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I was at a meeting last week with a local supply chain company, which said it was finding it difficult to get finance and that although a number of banks were saying to Government that they are still lending, they were saying to local oil companies, “We are not lending to oil right now.”

Peter Aldous: It is very helpful to have that feedback. I raised this at the New Anglia local enterprise partnership oil and gas taskforce meeting last week, and the feedback I got from people was that they had spoken individually to all the banks in the region and that the banks were being co-operative. However, it can, of course, vary from region to region, and that is what we have look out for.

I have talked about the short-term measures. Secondly, in the longer term, the Treasury needs to work with the industry on producing an overall road map for fiscal change. That would include not only the fiscal changes in this Budget, but a longer-term blueprint for further reductions in the fiscal burden as the basin matures. That would help to provide greater clarity for all those working in the UKCS at a time of uncertainty, and it would boost investment and hopefully give confidence to banks. In short, the industry needs its own long-term economic plan.

It is also important that local initiatives are put in place to support people and businesses at this uncertain time. The New Anglia LEP oil and gas taskforce, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) and I are members, has developed a package of measures to provide advice and support to businesses and their workforce. The taskforce commissioned research that showed that 26 companies have filed for administration in the Lowestoft and Yarmouth area between April and October 2015 and more than 1,000 people directly employed—that is, directly employed in the industry have been made redundant, with many companies asking staff to take unpaid leave or salary reductions. As a result of that research, the taskforce has agreed a package of measures prioritising two areas.

First, for oil and gas businesses, free initial face-to-face assessments will be provided, followed by, if required, a 50% discount towards a more intensive support package that will be provided by specialist consultants. That will include advice on diversification, restructuring and alternative growth opportunities, as well as on developing business plans. Those discounts will be funded by Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils and by Waveney District Council and Great Yarmouth Borough Council, which have set aside £80,000. In addition, the LEP is modifying its growing business fund grant scheme to support and sustain future business plans, with £250,000 being set aside.
Secondly, those losing their jobs are being provided with support to retrain, find alternative employment or maintain their industry certificates. Assistance will be provided via Jobcentre Plus to ensure that displaced workers are properly supported to access new job opportunities in the local area. The taskforce is also working with local colleges and training providers to ensure access to relevant training courses.

It is important to acknowledge those in the New Anglia LEP and the East of England Energy Group who have worked tirelessly to come up with this package, as well as the four councils and the LEP for providing the funding at a time when their budgets are under great pressure. It is right that such packages are worked up locally, so that they are tailored to the specific needs of those in the local areas, but there is a role for Government. First, they should co-ordinate such initiatives across the country—I understand that Scottish Enterprise is doing something similar, although I am not aware of the position in the north-east and in the north-west. Secondly, if the schemes are a success but the downturn goes on for longer, the Government should look to provide the funds for these initiatives to continue.

If you will bear with me for a few minutes, Mr Walker, I am getting towards the end of my speech. Let me say a few words about the urgent need for a regional plan for the southern North sea, on which the OGA has started work. Sir Ian Wood recommended that regional plans should be developed for the different areas of the UKCS. There is a vital need to do that in the southern North sea, where there are significant potential reserves of gas remaining to be recovered. That is evidenced by the Cygnus find—the largest gas discovery in the last 25 years; work is due to start later this year—and the potential of the Tolmount discovery. With gas continuing to play a key role as the main fuel source for UK electricity generation, this plan is important to maintain security of supply.

Today, gas is very cheap and it is readily shipped around the world in liquefied natural gas form. Seventy per cent of gas is currently imported, but much of it is from countries that have an unpredictable political outlook. However, the gas price is increasingly volatile and we need to have our own domestic source of supply. Although the southern North sea still has significant potential, it is particularly vulnerable to premature contraction and decommissioning. We need to ensure that the existing infrastructure is fully utilised and not placed at risk, and that licences are in the hands of those prepared to invest.

The price of gas used to be closely tied to the oil price. With the rise of shale gas in the US, that is no longer the case, and I am advised that there is now a closer link to something called the “Henry Hub”. That leads one to consider whether there should be a different fiscal regime for gas in the southern North sea. Industry opinion is divided; some say that the fuel should have its own tax framework, whereas others say that would be complicated and that we need to move to a simpler system. On balance, I am coming round to favouring the latter, but I urge the Treasury to look at this issue closely.

Although the southern North sea is a mature basin and, in many respects, we are embarking on the final chapter of oil and gas recovery on the UKCS. In some respects this voyage is a new venture, with a new business model built on a cornerstone of collaboration. Up until now, the big oil companies have led the way in pursuing innovation, efficiency and cost reduction. With the industry in future likely to be made up of a larger number of smaller businesses, a new way of harnessing the drive for innovation needs to be found. The offshore wind catapult has been very successful in promoting innovation and driving down costs. I would be grateful if the Government considered setting up a similar catapult for the oil and gas industry.

In conclusion—I sense I have tried your patience for a little too long, Mr Walker—the North sea oil and gas industry is a great British industry, which has given so much to the UK over the past 50 years. It is currently facing extreme challenges, but it can play a key role for the next 35 years. That key role involves keeping the lights on, providing good and exciting jobs and making a significant contribution to GDP—to Great Britain plc. Three ingredients are required for it to do so: the right regulatory framework—Sir Ian has provided us with that particular framework, which we now need to move forward with—the right fiscal framework and, above all, a spirit of collaboration.

1.59 pm  

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I apologise that, having left a Bill Committee to speak in this important debate, I will have to return to the Committee when I have spoken here. I hope that the Ministers and other hon. Members will excuse me.

It is difficult to speak after my friend the hon. Member for Wavenny (Peter Aldous), who encompassed so much of what I want to say. I thank him for taking the lead at the Backbench Business Committee to help to secure this debate. My friend the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and I were both pleased to support this timely application. The hon. Gentleman’s passion for oil and gas and his great knowledge of the subject were well demonstrated in his very thorough speech. He has left little for us to add, except to express our own passion for our regions and describe how we are affected by the downturn in oil and gas.

I am sure the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, has heard, and indeed heeded, many times the points that are being raised today. I thank her for re-establishing the cross-party oil and gas group, which functioned so well in the last Parliament after being established by the then Secretary of State. It helped to promote fabrication in a way that brought jobs to Tyneside particularly, and that was very welcome. I reiterate the appreciation and relief that the group has been re-established. The Minister intends the group to focus on improving the competitiveness of the UK fabrication sector in this very hard climate. I am sure our next meeting with the fabrication forum will be fruitful. The way the hon. Lady chaired the first meeting shows that we will have a busy and productive time ahead.

Cheaper oil at the pumps is welcomed by the majority of people in this country, but the dramatic fall in oil prices is a disaster for industries in places like Tyneside. Twenty years ago, our shipbuilding industry finally closed with the loss of the great Swan Hunter on the
Tyne. Many workers were left with no jobs, but others were able to secure a future by transferring their skills to the offshore oil and gas industry. Instead of the building of great oil tankers, we saw with awe the fantastic platforms that dominated the skyline, amazing all who saw them. It was a wonder they ever got off the river, but they did. That was a new era which we hoped would last a long time, but given the way things are, that does not seem likely. I hope there will be some reversal of that fortune.

In my Adjournment debate on this issue just over a year ago, I quoted the then chief executive of Oil & Gas UK, who said at the time of the organisation’s 2015 activity survey:

“This offshore oil and gas industry is a major national asset.”

More relevant than that is the fact that, for each of us taking part in this debate today, the industry has a special relevance to the economic prosperity of our communities. Over the past few years, I have followed the fortunes of the oil and gas industry via the success or otherwise of businesses on the Tyne—companies such as Barrier, W.D. Close, SMD, Shepherd Offshore Services, Wellstream and OGN, the last of which I have worked with most regularly. I will say more about OGN to show how its fortunes mirror those of the oil and gas industry generally.

In 2012, when I asked the Prime Minister to consider tax incentives in the Budget, the workforce at OGN stood at around 1,500. Last year, that workforce stood at 2,500, thanks to a contract for fitting the EnQuest producer FPSO—floating production, storage and offloading vessel. That contract, secured with the help of the cross-party oil and gas group, was completed last March, and sadly, in the last few months, despite valiant efforts by the company to find work, the yard has shed all those jobs. Men and women in my community of Wallsend are out of work, despite being highly skilled.

I take this opportunity to commend the Department for Work and Pensions on the helpfulness of its rapid resource team. The Department commended OGN for letting the team have access to workers long before the nail was in the coffin, with the result that many of the workers have been able to upskill or transfer skills to get different employment. That should be noted in these hard times.

In a letter to the Chancellor in December 2015 about the future of the UK continental shelf, Dennis Clark, the indomitable chairman of OGN—everyone in the business has probably met him at some point—stressed that the way forward was to improve the long-term investment potential of the North sea and that this had to be done by larger operators because smaller ones are struggling. As ever, Dennis believes that there needs to be an overhaul of the tax structure to help North sea operators. In his letter to the Chancellor, he highlighted the fact that in some mature fields like Forties and Beryl, in-field drilling supported by 3D and 4D seismics has resulted in identifying and exploiting new reservoirs. He believes that that could mean there is even more oil than we think in the North sea. He urged pursuing this course of action to be a focus of attention for the newly formed Oil and Gas Authority.

Announcements made by the Government in January will certainly help the industry in these hard times and are welcomed, but the importance of the Government’s support for the industry is strengthened not just by comments from people in the industry such as Dennis Clark, but because of the 2016 activity survey, which was published last week by Oil and Gas UK. I commend the industry’s efforts and success in reducing operating costs and increasing production, as set out in the report, but I am very concerned that the survey outlines the fact that exploration is at an all-time low, with little sign of improvement. According to the survey, this year only £1 billion will be approved for investment in new projects compared with £8 billion per year in the previous five years. It can only be described as soul-destroying that, despite efficiencies and resulting successes, because the price of oil has fallen 70% since summer 2014, it is likely that 43% of UKCS fields will be operating at a loss, further deterring exploration and investment.

The UK still has up to 20 billion barrels of oil and, as my friend the hon. Member for Waveney said, can provide a secure source of energy for our country for years to come. That should not be forgotten. I agree with Oil & Gas UK that we must exploit to the full the advantages that come with having a mature province on our doorstep. That must be made known worldwide. Let us exploit our skills, technology and engineering. We cannot waste this resource—that would be a travesty.

The Minister will be aware that Oil & Gas UK has made Budget representations to the Treasury in a bid to help our industry to survive. I particularly note the idea of making loans to enable the industry to have money to invest. Fabricators like OGN in north Tyneside need to see that investment is taking place; otherwise, they will have no hope.

I started by speaking about how the fortunes of the industry are mirrored in OGN. In the last few days, OGN has sent a letter to the unions advising that it will have to market the site. It hopes that it may get a last-minute reprieve by going into the offshore wind industry, because it has the capacity, skills and ability to do that. I know that the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, who is here today, has promised to meet OGN to discuss some of the things that are causing it problems there.

It is great that the industry is looking forward; it is terrible that more than 2,000 jobs have been lost in recent months. We cannot even imagine what it is like for people who work in these industries, who were highly paid and usually able to enjoy quite a good lifestyle, being reduced to not having an income and perhaps having to work away from home. At the moment, people are able to work in their local communities, but if they lose that job and are fortunate enough to get another, it could be on the other side of the world. That is a loss socially as well as economically to our communities.

I ask the Minister of State to continue on the road that she has started on, to make the case for oil and gas and to plead with the Exchequer Secretary to listen to the recommendations that have been made by Oil & Gas UK and all the hon. Members who are representing the interests of their communities here today.
I represent Aberdeen North, which is obviously one of the places most heavily affected by the current downturn. Last summer, when we were first meeting oil companies and talking to industry bodies about what was happening in the oil and gas industry, they were talking about the oil price being “lower for longer” and about being cautiously optimistic about the future. There has now been a shift in the feeling: it feels as though the price will be lower and lower for longer and longer. They are not talking just about being robust at $60 a barrel; they are talking about being robust at $50, and there are even whispers about people trying to be robust at $40. It has become a completely different feeling, even in the few months since the summer, because the global oil price is so unpredictable and it is not something that we can do anything about. One industry leader, when asked the other day what we could do about the oil and gas price, said, “Hope.” That is the only thing that we can do about the price.

There are other things that can be done, though. I want to talk about the situation in Aberdeen and how we are feeling now. I read an article from a couple of years ago that said that about 40,000 people were employed directly in the oil and gas industry in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. Aberdeen is a relatively small city; only 225,000 to 250,000 people live there, so if 40,000 are directly employed in the oil and gas industry, that is a massive proportion of our employment.

I grew up in Aberdeen. It was always the case that the dads of people I knew were away offshore, working in the oil industry. Now, people I know are themselves away offshore, or their husbands are away offshore, working in the oil industry. It is every second or third family. The oil and gas industry is not a small employer in the city; it is massive. I was talking to Scottish Enterprise the other day, and it reckons that there have been 10,000 direct job losses in the industry.

Looking more widely, Aberdeen and Grampian chamber of commerce did a survey last November that found that hotel occupancy was down by 15%. The people working in hotels are finding themselves squeezed as a result of the downturn; those are indirect job losses. Housing sales in Aberdeen are down by 14% in the course of a year. Taxi drivers are complaining like crazy—they always complain, but they are complaining particularly about the downturn. One of the local food banks made money by selling fruit to companies. Those companies are no longer buying that fruit because they have cut back on the extras, so the food banks, as well as the people working in the oil and gas industry, are suffering on the basis that it does not have the revenue streams that it had before. We are not just talking about direct job losses in the oil and gas industry in Aberdeen; this is a real issue for our whole city.

When oil and gas operators were surveyed in November, 85% of them foresaw further redundancies in 2016. This is not the end of the story for Aberdeen; the bottom has not been reached yet. We do not know what the oil price will do in 2016, but we are pretty sure that it will not get back up to $100 a barrel.

The job losses are a major issue, but there are many people in Aberdeen who have never worked in the oil and gas industry. Despite it being so important for our city, there are many people who have never had those high salaries and who have always struggled. Because we had the industry and the high salaries, they have had to struggle against massive house prices and, for example, a pint of beer in a pub in Aberdeen is more expensive than it does down the road in Dundee. Having struggled with all those issues, the knock-on impacts from what is happening in the industry now are hitting them even harder, even though they never had the high salary beforehand to back them up. Therefore, this is a very big issue for our city—for our micro-economy in Aberdeen.

I do not want to carry on being quite so gloomy. There are patches of light—good things happening in the industry and in the wider economy in Aberdeen. We are seeing a degree of resilience in Aberdeen. Aberdeen has been through downturns before. It has not been through any big ones in the times that I can remember, but it has been through downturns before; we have suffered before. One big issue that we are struggling with involves those companies that are becoming market leaders in things such as decommissioning. We are now what is called a super-mature field in the North sea and we are getting very good at and ahead of the curve on things such as decommissioning, but there are issues.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) mentioned the banks. Although the banks say that they are lending, the people from the companies I have been talking to say, “Yes, the banks say that, but they are not actually following through and it is not happening.” There is an issue there. The banks are not lending to the companies, so the companies are in a shakier situation financially, so they are less likely to get money from the banks. If the Government showed confidence in the oil industry and made it clear that they would support the long-term future of the industry, we would get out of the current cycle of banks refusing to lend and then the companies not being so financially viable—and on and on.

The Scottish Government are doing a huge amount to try to inspire confidence in Aberdeen and to make people realise that things are good in Aberdeen. The Scottish Government, along with the UK Government, have signed the city deal, with each putting in £125 million for the city. The Scottish Government are also putting in extra money that will particularly benefit the city. They are putting in £254 million of infrastructure investment, which is additional to the Haudagain roundabout improvements—people who have been to Aberdeen have probably heard about the Haudagain. Also, there is the Aberdeen western peripheral route, which has been on the books—for an awfully long time. Basically, in Aberdeen we do not have a bypass—our current “bypass” goes through the city. The new road will actually go around the city. It is a huge infrastructure project and it is doing its bit to help the economy and increase confidence in north-east Scotland.

We in Aberdeen have been shouting for many of these infrastructure improvements for a very long time, and now they are finally coming through. I am particularly pleased to see that measure of confidence from the Scottish Government. There has been a slight measure of confidence from the UK Government, I agree, but we would like more. We would like more support for the industry in general and for Aberdeen in particular.

I have spoken about confidence and the effect that that will have on things such as the banks. There are a couple of other issues. What if the big companies
decide that the North sea is too difficult? Many of these companies are global companies. They can choose to invest elsewhere; they can choose to put their money elsewhere. That is bad for the UK because the UK does not get the tax take anymore, but something that is a major problem is if people start to decommission too early. If people know anything about the infrastructure of the North sea, they know that if we start to decommission one place, the satellites are scuppered and further out fields are less viable as a result. This is what the maximising economic recovery report was about. If we think about it purely in fiscal and financial terms, it is hugely important to push decommissioning out as far as possible, to maximise the amount of money that the Treasury will take, to increase jobs for the long term and to become the market leader in the supply chain and the decommissioning sector.

What can the Government do about the fiscal regime? We would really like them to look at the supplementary charge and at the tax regime around late life assets, to ensure that assets can be transferred to smaller companies that can prolong the life of the assets to get as much as possible out of the fields before choosing to decommission. Also, any pressure that the Government can put on the banks actually to lend, rather than just to say that they are lending, would be fantastic.

I have another wee ask for the Government although it is not really for either of the Ministers present to answer. Will the Government ensure that the jobcentre gives my guys the correct advice when they walk through the door? There are lots of things going on for people who have been made unemployed in the offshore oil and gas industry. I am sure that my hon. Friends will talk about Scottish Enterprise’s taskforce. Jobcentre staff need to know all that information, so that when somebody walks through the door, they can give them all the information about the taskforce and about where to go for extra training.

Aberdeen has not been in this situation before. We are talking about highly skilled people, some of whom have never been unemployed in their lives. They need to be given the right support because we cannot afford to lose them from the oil industry or from Aberdeen. People are making the choice to go to Dubai and to other countries to support their families financially, but we do not want to lose them and their expertise from this country. We do not want them to have to go to another industry if there is a job opening in the oil and gas industry here. If there is a job opening in renewables—fantastic—we can get them moved to that field and particularly our micro-economy, as prosperous as possible.

Every company and industry body that I have spoken to thus far is cautiously optimistic about the OGA. Everybody says, “It looks like the OGA is going to do the job that it is setting out to do. Let’s see if it follows through.” The Government have backed the OGA and I hope that they continue to do so. We will continue to back the OGA and support it in whatever way we can because its work is vital and it has been very good at listening thus far.

What about the legacy? What happens to Aberdeen? In Aberdeen, we are good at a number of other things. We are getting particularly good at biopharmaceuticals, which is terrible because I cannot spell it—every time I try to write it down, I have a major problem. We are very good at food and drink, and are world leaders in nutrition. Apparently, we are getting very good at big data, which I will have to learn about very quickly because I do not know much about that. There are two world-class universities in Aberdeen. In transferable skills from the oil and gas industry in a city that has been a world leader in innovation, we will be top of the pile when it comes to renewables, especially if the Government support and give investors confidence in renewables in general, and particularly in Scotland.

I appreciate the chance to have this debate and to talk not only about the offshore oil and gas industry, but about Aberdeen, which I cannot help but talk about whenever I stand up to speak.

2.23 pm

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, in what will be a brief contribution. I congratulate the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), who is my very good friend and neighbour, on securing this debate on an important and timely subject. They have made a strong case for the industry; I will concentrate very much on my locality.

Hundreds of jobs in my constituency depend on the oil and gas industry, where times are, to put it mildly, very tough. Sixteen years ago almost to the day in this very Chamber, I initiated a debate on the plight of the shipbuilding and offshore industry on the River Tyne, because there were similar concerns about jobs being lost and an ageing workforce. We feared losing skills but, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside said, the offshore industry has provided some continuity. The situation at the time was alleviated by the then Government, who placed warship orders on to the Tyne. Of course, that is not an option for any Government when it comes to the oil and gas industry, because no Government procure rigs or jackets. The common theme in that debate, as in this one, was the vital importance of jobs and the concern at the loss of jobs, whether those jobs were in Waveney, Aberdeen or North Tyneside.

As MPs, in our surgeries and postbags, we receive letters and emails often from the wives and partners of men who work in the industry and who have lost their jobs. The importance of jobs was well understood by the former owner of Swan Hunter, Jaap Kroese, who asked me, following that debate 16 years ago, to chair the then new North East Maritime and Offshore Cluster. I am sad to say that he died at the end of last year. Although he was Dutch, he was an honorary Geordie and made a strong case for the industry; I will concentrate very much on my locality.

Whatever jobs in my constituency depend on the oil and gas industry, where times are, to put it mildly, very tough. Sixteen years ago almost to the day in this very Chamber, I initiated a debate on the plight of the shipbuilding and offshore industry on the River Tyne, because there were similar concerns about jobs being lost and an ageing workforce. We feared losing skills but, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside said, the offshore industry has provided some continuity. The situation at the time was alleviated by the then Government, who placed warship orders on to the Tyne. Of course, that is not an option for any Government when it comes to the oil and gas industry, because no Government procure rigs or jackets. The common theme in that debate, as in this one, was the vital importance of jobs and the concern at the loss of jobs, whether those jobs were in Waveney, Aberdeen or North Tyneside.

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Those involved in the offshore oil and gas industry—those in fabrication and those who work offshore—in the north-east face serious challenges. The decline, as the hon. Member for Waveney pointed out, partly reflects the maturity of the industry in the North sea, but the scale and speed of job losses reflect the collapse of oil prices. The situation requires action now on a number of occasions. We are getting particularly good at biopharmaceuticals, which is terrible because I cannot spell it—every time I try to write it down, I have a major problem. We are very good at food and drink, and are world leaders in nutrition. Apparently, we are getting very good at big data, which I will have to learn about very quickly because I do not know much about that. There are two world-class universities in Aberdeen. In transferable skills from the oil and gas industry in a city that has been a world leader in innovation, we will be top of the pile when it comes to renewables, especially if the Government support and give investors confidence in renewables in general, and particularly in Scotland.
fronts. In these particular circumstances we need action, but we also need to ensure when we emerge from this period that companies are competitive, so that the North sea remains competitive and we can keep those jobs.

There is a role for the Government. A number of measures in the Energy Bill currently before Parliament are very welcome indeed. In particular, the establishment of the OGA is important. Of course, the immediate opportunity comes with the Budget, where steps are needed to further alleviate pressure and boost investment. I will not go through each of the tax measures—I could not even if I tried—but I was very pleased that, until a moment ago, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, was in the debate. I am sure the industry is talking to the Government, and I do hope the Government are listening.

I want to make one general point and one specific point about the tax framework. It seems that although there have been changes—I accept that the Government have done a great deal to help—the overall tax regime has not really kept pace with changes in the price of oil. It cannot be right that a tax regime with supplementary charges reflects a time when oil prices were higher than the $30 to $35 or so that they are now. I hope the Chancellor has at the forefront of his mind the need to take action to create a tax environment more in keeping with the current situation than the one that prevailed earlier.

A specific area that I hope the Chancellor will look at—and which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North—is the issue of asset transfer. If companies wish to leave the North sea, we need to ensure that it is easier than it is now to transfer assets, whether to companies that are already in place or, indeed, to people who want to enter the oil and gas fields. Sometimes, those are acorn companies. In my experience, they are people who have worked for bigger companies and who see an opportunity for applying technology in a better way. They are welcome additions and we should not put any barriers in their way. If it were possible to transfer decommissioning tax relief with the asset, that may boost activity, and that would come at little or no cost to the Treasury.

If the Treasury is to play its part, so too must companies. Many are trying to reduce costs below the point at which it is necessary to get a profit if oil is $30 a barrel, but that leaves margins very tight indeed. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside said, if the price of oil remains at its current level for the rest of 2016, almost half of North sea oil fields will operate at a loss, and that simply is not sustainable.

Advanced Industrial Solutions, which I am pleased to say is an expanding company in my constituency, is working hard, particularly on skills training, but also on supplying equipment and components to the oil and gas industry, especially the offshore industry. By working with major companies, it is cutting costs without cutting standards or cutting health and safety, which is the kind of collaboration that the hon. Member for Waveney mentioned at a local level. The company is upskilling workers for a time when the industry recovers—as we hope it will—or at least for a time when oil prices begin to rise again. It is also upskilling workers who have worked in the offshore industry for new and emerging industries such as onshore and offshore wind turbines and the construction industry. Many jobs that can be done offshore are valued in those industries and in construction. My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside and I watched people being upskilled to use complicated rope methods of painting and repairing. If people can use those skills offshore on rigs, albeit in a more dangerous situation, they can use them in construction, and on onshore and offshore turbines too. Such skills are very transferable.

Sometimes, the cost of training is paid by employers, but often it is paid either by employees or by former employees who, if they have been made redundant, pay for it from their redundancy or from their own savings. If someone is willing, has worked hard and saved money, and wants to upskill because they want to work hard again, make money and pay taxes, it cannot be right that the course they go on to upskill is subject to VAT. It just does not make sense that we are putting VAT on such businesses. I understand that any Government will say that once VAT is on, it has to stay on, but—which is my plea—we have previously reduced VAT in some situations. I would ask the Government to consider that.

Finally, I have followed carefully what the hon. Member for Waveney is trying to do. I said earlier that my debate was 16 years ago, which sadly makes me an elder statesman, if that is the right phrase—it is simply code for getting on a bit. I am slightly cynical when I hear the word “taskforce”, which is a bit like “action plan”, where the emphasis is on the plan and often not on the action. I honestly hope that he will be successful with his taskforce, and I wish him well. I am interested in the Government’s view on taskforces and whether they favour the establishment of taskforces locally, or whether it is up to local areas themselves and that the Government do not have a view. Should such taskforces be focused on skills? Previously, in 2000, I would be knocking on the door of the regional development agency and saying, “What are you going to do about retaining skills, and how are you going to show the world that the River Tyne is a centre of excellence for shipbuilding, and for the offshore industry, too?” I am not convinced that the local enterprise partnership is as well placed or is set up in that way. Even if it is, I wonder whether the Government will consider extra resources in some areas for taskforces, perhaps based on local enterprise partnerships, because some areas have been affected worse than others.

I reiterate: we need action, and we need action now. We may talk about the price of oil, about millions and billions of barrels left in the North sea, and about billions of pounds of investment, but ultimately it comes down to jobs. We have to be doing, and be seen to be doing, everything we can to safeguard those jobs, because they are some of the most highly skilled and dangerous jobs, and they are done by some of the most hard-working people I know.

2.34 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and to speak in this debate. Mr. Walker, I am the Scottish National party Member for Livingston, which does not have an obvious connection with the oil and gas sector, although we
have some businesses down the supply chain, and many of my constituents work in the oil and gas sector, as do people across the country.

I spent the last three years of my career before coming to this place working in the oil and gas industry in Aberdeen. I spent seven years of my working career in Aberdeen and the north-east of Scotland, so it is an area and an industry that is close to my heart. I will take a little walk down memory lane, as it is appropriate to the topic. I spent the last three years of my career in the service sector. I worked for a year in a subsea company and then for an asset integrity and construction company. The last company I worked for was the biggest supplier of people power and scaffolding offshore. From speaking to many of my friends and former colleagues, many of whom have lost their jobs, I know the impact of job losses on family life and on communities, which is substantial. We have heard extensive information about the industry today, but it is always important to remember that there are lives behind every job loss and every company shutdown, but there is also hope, because there are so many people in this industry.

We talk about the UK’s exports and how we are not doing as well as we could, but we do not just export products and innovations; we export people. I have travelled to a number of countries and cities across the world, and in every oil and gas city, whether it is Houston, Abu Dhabi, Dubai or Perth, I hear an Aberdonian accent, which is a fact. Aberdonians have worked for generations in the oil and gas industry, and they have been exported all over the world. Scotland has a long tradition of innovation. I think it was Arthur Miller, the American writer, who said that Scotland invented the modern world. Well, it is true that Aberdeen and the people of the north-east of Scotland pretty much invented the oil and gas sector and many of its technologies and innovations.

I worked with one guy in my last company called Jim Chalmers, who worked on the hook-up of the Brent Delta, which was the platform for which Brent crude was named. Before I left, we were working on the decommissioning of that platform. He has literally spent his entire career in the sector and in the industry, and he has some frankly incredible stories to tell. He also lost many friends in the Piper Alpha disaster, which I will mention later.

On global markets and pressures, we have seen market oversupply and a trading war between shale oil and the middle east. That has put pressure on oil, causing it to drop to a 12-year low, although it is bouncing back somewhat. Lower and lower for longer and longer, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, will be the norm. I have been to many Oil & Gas UK events over the years, and the business breakfast I went to last week was one of the most entertaining and informative. An independent analyst, Beth Mitchell, talked about some very dry and technical information with significant wit and flair, so I pay tribute to Oil & Gas UK—not just for the way it presented its activity survey but for the way that Beth presented the information. One thing the activity report drew on was the challenges and pressures put on the shale industry and how the industry has responded in the US. The industry has developed new innovative technologies. It has gone back and re-fracked wells and has been able to operate at a much lower price than anybody had expected, which has been causing additional pressure. She highlighted how the oil and gas industry could learn from that.

As we approach the Budget, I follow everyone in saying how important it is that the Government listen. One key thing that happened in a recent Budget announcement was the cancellation of the carbon capture project, which was a huge blow for us in Scotland and the north-east. I understand that the Government have their books to balance, but we are looking to maximise recovery and to do all we can for this sector, for the energy industry and for innovation and new technologies. It was a hammer blow to the north-east of Scotland and to Scotland’s industry, and we urge the Government to reconsider this technology and the removal of the investment.

I have spoken briefly about innovation. I will touch on a couple of innovations with which I was directly and personally involved. One of them, at the subsea company I worked for, was called the autonomous inspection vehicle. For those who know what an ROV is—a remotely operated vehicle—an AIV is tethered to a boat, and it goes around inspecting in areas too dangerous for divers. The company where I worked developed one that was tetherless. It was basically a remote-controlled car under the sea, which was incredible technology. The company put in a lot of investment, and the company with which it had partnered, SeeByte, developed the technology. SeeByte was a spin-off from Heriot-Watt University.

Interestingly, just before I left, I got news that SeeByte, which had been a Scottish firm, would be sold to an American firm. That was particularly disappointing, because we see it over and again: companies in Scotland and the UK get to a certain level, and there is just not enough angel or equity investment to get them over the line to the next step, so they go to, or are bought by, American firms. It was disappointing to see that happen. I know that there have been changes to innovation grants. We have gone from grants to loans, and we are now hearing companies talking about moving abroad. That is disappointing, and I urge the Government to rethink.

The other technology was called ERBAS, or extended reach breathing apparatus system. A couple of guys in a workshop came up with a piece of technology to help the guys—they are largely men—who go down the leg of a platform. For those of us who cannot imagine it, I have a friend whose father was one of the last coal miners in Scotland, and then went on to work in the oil industry at Sullom Voe in Shetland. He said that although he had been in a roof fall in an underground coal mine, he had never been as scared as he was going down the leg of a platform. The technology that the company developed was to stop those guys having to carry their air. Instead, they could make a free descent, plugging in as they went, so they could breathe going down and coming back up. The company was investing in the technology and trying to get it to take off, but was unable to get external investment.

Those are just a couple of examples, but they are significant. Companies across the oil and gas sector are developing similar technologies every single day, and we need to do as much as we can to support them and their opportunities.
Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) have made a powerful point about how innovation requires financing. Does she agree—I am sure she does—that access to finance is critical to maintaining that drive for innovation?

Hannah Bardell: Absolutely. I absolutely agree. It is critical that we send the right message not just to the industry but to the markets that we are there for them and will invest in the technology. Again, as our exports drop, we must consider how we can do better. This is an area where we are leading the world, and we must invest.

Another innovation developed was the rebreather. As I am sure many Members remember, there was a series of helicopter accidents in the North sea, and in August 2013, a helicopter went down off the coast of Shetland. I was part of the emergency response team for my company at the time; sadly, we lost someone in that accident. That experience changed me and everybody else involved, and I will certainly never forget it, but the industry’s response—we had the support of Oil & Gas UK, the police and all the various bodies—was incredible. It showed the industry’s robustness and ability to respond. Ultimately, getting in a helicopter is pretty much the only method of transport for people who work offshore. The industry’s response—developing a new breathing system and new ways to get people offshore—was important, because the accidents put significant pressure on production and on the ability to get people out and back safely.

I will touch briefly on the apprenticeship levy, which was introduced by the UK Government to deliver 3 million more apprenticeships. We welcome anything that can deliver more apprentices. However, there is a lack of clarity on the issue and a concern in the industry, which I have raised and will meet the Minister about shortly, regarding double charging. Some parts of the industry are already paying a levy to the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board for apprentices.

I urge the Government to do all they can to ensure that the levy is clear, concise and simplified, and that it delivers what it promises. Scottish Ministers have had concerns about the lack of consultation, and that they are still not clear how the new body being created will work. It is important that people do not end up being put into apprenticeships that are not real apprenticeships but low-paid jobs. We must do our best to get young people into this important sector and many others. I welcome the Minister’s willingness to meet me, and I thank the Aberdeen and Grampian chamber of commerce, which has done a lot of work to bring together people in the oil and gas sector on that issue.

Oil & Gas UK’s operating expenditure report for 2017, the activity survey, says that the industry has made substantial progress. We must commend it on reducing operating costs, with total operating expenditure falling by around 15% to £8.2 billion. The industry has the wit and will to do so. Clearly, innovation comes not only in technological form but in terms of expenditure. Under massive pressure, the industry has led the world in innovation. We must do all that we can, in terms of the tax regime and the field allowances that Oil & Gas UK has called for, to reform the special taxes paid by the industry, to promote investment and maximise capacity during the downturn.

Other hon. Members and I recently met the Underwater Centre in Fort William, which trains divers across the globe, particularly in the UK and Scotland. We must remember that diving is one of the most dangerous jobs that anybody can do. The Underwater Centre told us that the average age of a diver is now more than 50. What is happening is that although people are still coming through for training from Scotland and the UK—less so globally—the centre is seriously concerned that when the upturn comes, not enough people will have been invested in and not enough divers will have been trained, and we will get back into the same cycle that we have seen before, in which only certain people have certain skills, and companies must pay a fortune for them. I saw it happen in the industry when I was there: people were paid phenomenal salaries for specialist skills, because we had not had the foresight to invest in training.

I come to the work that the Scottish Government have done with Scottish Enterprise and Scottish Development International. I know from having tried to open an arm of a business in Norway—and succeeded—how important Scottish Enterprise and SDI were. They gave us support and financing to attend, for example, the Offshore Northern Seas conference in Norway and get business, and helped us understand how to operate in a different country. The Scottish Government have been doing everything that they can to support the industry in its time of need. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon set up a jobs taskforce in January 2015 in collaboration with Scottish Enterprise, chaired by its CEO Lena Wilson. It is only fair to pay tribute to Lena Wilson, who has done a huge amount of work on the issue. She has worked tirelessly with the Oil and Gas Authority, Oil & Gas UK and many others.

The Scottish Government are also running an “adopt an apprentice” scheme through Skills Development Scotland to re-employ any modern apprentices in the industry who have lost their jobs or apprenticeships. On 1 February 2016, the Scottish Government announced £12.5 million for oil and gas innovation and further business support, including £10 million in Scottish Enterprise funding to help reduce the risks associated with carrying out research and development and enable access to specialist exports to help kick-start innovation projects in Scotland.

Finally, I would like to make a point about health and safety or, as it is often called in the oil and gas sector, HSSE or HSSEQ—health, safety, security, environment and quality. The right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) also mentioned it. At a time when costs are under such huge pressure, it is important that health and safety are not compromised. I have seen the results personally, and had to deal with incidents. The industry has come a long way since Piper Alpha. It is hugely innovative and it continues to invest, but it is important that we send the message that health and safety must not be compromised in these difficult times.

In conclusion, there is a huge amount being done by Government, by industry bodies and all across the sector, including by companies and individuals, but we have to send the strongest message possible that this industry has a prosperous future and that we need to do
all we can to support it. The oil and gas industry matters and the message that we have to send to our banks and to investors is that it is open for business and is here to stay.

2.49 pm

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker.

What can I say that has not already been covered today? Many people who work in the oil and gas sector live in my constituency of West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine, and those in my constituency who do not work in the industry almost certainly have a family member who works in it. I have close friends and family who work in the industry, for Shell, KCA Deutag, Technip, Conoco, Total, Stena and shipbrokers attached to the industry, or even in Aberdeen harbour itself. I said in my maiden speech that I would argue for better support for the industry, and along with my colleagues from the north-east and my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) I have done so and will continue to do so.

The recent drop in oil prices that has been described today has had a big impact in the north-east. It has affected not only those working directly in the oil and gas sector but those working in hospitality, leisure, tourism, food and drink, and many more. At one time—indeed, very recently—in Aberdeen, it was said that it was cheaper to get a hotel room in the city at the weekend than it was during the week, because of the number of business people staying in Aberdeen during the week.

That is why I welcome the recent investment that has been made in Aberdeen city and shire through the city region deal, and additionally from the Scottish Government. I am particularly pleased about the money earmarked for key projects such as the Laurencekirk junction in my constituency and—to my further delight—for broadband infrastructure.

I also welcome the support that has been provided through the Energy Jobs Taskforce and the Transition Training Fund to those who have lost their jobs, which will allow oil and gas workers to retrain as teachers in STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths. Local institutions in the north-east are also pitching in to lend their support to the sector, with unemployed oil workers being offered a 20% discount on energy-related postgraduate courses at Robert Gordon University.

It has been said that there is a moral imperative to help the oil and gas sector, and I agree with that. Oil and gas workers, particularly those who work offshore, have to spend weeks at a time away from their families, living in one of the most inhospitable places that I can think of. That puts considerable strain on families and communities. These workers have to take a survival course just to go on their commute to work and, as has been said by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston, there are often accidents on those journeys.

Consequently, when we ask for support for the industry, we do so because we recognise the sacrifices that are made by the men and women who are on the rigs, day in and day out. We recognise their hard work, which has brought billions to the UK Treasury. So, when the industry faces hard times, as it does just now, it should be able to expect support from the UK Government to get it back on its feet and to restore confidence in it.

The oil and gas industry is incredibly innovative and entrepreneurial, with whole businesses in the supply chain being created out of simple solutions to all manner of problems faced by the industry. Last Friday, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and I visited an international company that started as an idea in a garden shed. It is that kind of company that make the oil and gas industry so unique and so important.

I cannot speak about the oil and gas industry in my constituency without mentioning Westhill, which is the global centre of excellence in subsea engineering. It is also known as “SURF City”, which refers to “subsea umbilicals, riders and flowlines”—I do not really know what that means either—and it also does a lot with remotely operated vehicles, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston.

The subsea sector has pioneered game-changing technology and innovative thinking during the past 40 years. The theme for this year’s Subsea Expo was “Time for Transformation”, which aimed to recognise how the industry needs to change, including considering what can be done more simply and more effectively.

The last day of Subsea Expo was about encouraging young talent in the industry. Led by OPITO, which is the oil and gas skills body, the “Energise Your Future” campaign inspired secondary school students to engage with the oil and gas industry and find out more about the opportunities available within it. That campaign, along with initiatives such as the Energy Schools Challenge, allows young people to gain an insight into the industry, show off their general knowledge and get heard on the great Northsound 1.

Finally, the Industry Awareness Week, which will take place in Aberdeen in June, follows the Oil and Gas Authority’s call-to-action paper and allows young people aged 16 and over to engage with different areas of the oil and gas industry, showing the next generation the career choices that are available in the industry. As the oil and gas industry looks to become more innovative and efficient, it may be that it is the younger generation who will come up with the solutions to ensure that it survives and thrives.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I call Mr McCaig to speak.

2.55 pm

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Me? Right. [Laughter.] Thank you, Mr Walker, for calling me to speak. I was not quite expecting to be called and there are other people in the room who I assumed were speaking before me; clearly, I assumed wrongly.

I commend the hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), for securing this debate at the Backbench Business Committee. One of the unique frustrations of having the privilege of being my party’s Front-Bench spokesperson in this area is that I could not add my name to those of the Members who secured the debate, such is the importance of this industry to my constituency.
to Scotland and—as we have heard today—not only to large regions of the United Kingdom but to the United Kingdom as a whole.

We have heard from the three key areas: Aberdeen; north-east England; and south-east England. We have heard of distinct challenges facing these areas and we have heard accounts in different accents from the different areas, but let us be clear that those of us here who represent these areas speak with one voice about what is required.

I add my backing to everything that has been said about support for the industry. For all of us who represent constituencies with an oil industry, whether job losses in the industry are in Aberdeen, East Anglia or the north-east of England, we all feel them. They are hugely damaging to communities and it is incumbent upon us to do everything we can to secure the bright future that I believe this industry has; with the right support, I am absolutely sure that it will have a bright future.

The hon. Member for Waveney made an absolutely superb speech to kick off this debate, covering the issues in great detail: the challenges; the opportunities; and the solutions that exist. Let us be clear—the Government do not have the silver bullet that is the cure to the industry’s ills, but they have a significant remit in terms of tackling those ills.

There are three key areas around which there are challenges facing oil and gas. The first is price, which we can do nothing about. The second is the industry’s costs, which the industry is doing its bit on; it is doing it well, but that will result in job losses as money is taken out of the system. Nevertheless, that process is required to get the industry to that bright future. And the third factor is tax.

It may seem slightly perverse that at a time when companies are not making profits and when taxes are not flowing into the Treasury that we should be calling for tax cuts, but it is precisely at this time that we need to call for tax cuts and it is at this time that they will not come at great expense to the Treasury. It will not cost the Treasury anything, or it will only cost the Treasury little, to make tax cuts, but the benefit of making them will be substantially felt in the wider economy, as they will support employment and unlock the finance that we have talked about, which in turn will drive the innovation to support our supply chain in delivering the changes, the innovation, the skills and the expertise that this industry is already world-class in and world famous for.

What is at stake here? As we have heard, the industry has produced 42 billion barrels. The reasonable estimate is that there are another 20 billion barrels left. Even if we do nothing, a number of those barrels will be produced; the investment has gone in and the existing platforms will continue to produce. The projects that are in development at this stage will happen.

However, a considerable amount of those reserves that are left in the North sea might not be extracted, and if they are not extracted the cost will fall upon us all. There would be a loss of jobs, particularly in the areas represented by those of us who have spoken today. That would have a knock-on impact on the wider economy—the supply chain that stretches the length and breadth of these islands.

Kirsty Blackman: Specifically on the point about the barrels that are still to be extracted, does my hon. Friend agree that some of them are in more difficult types of field and so are more difficult to extract? The innovation, the research and development and the funding towards that are therefore hugely important for those fields.

Callum McCaig: I agree wholeheartedly. The make-up of the North sea is different from what it was and what has gone past. As well as the innovation and expertise, there is also the infrastructure that is already there, as a number of Members have mentioned. Once that is gone, there are fields that will go from being marginal on the positive side to being marginal on the negative side or just entirely uneconomic.

Returning to the point I was making on the missed opportunities, every single barrel of oil that we do not produce from the North sea we will need to get from somewhere else. We import oil and gas, and we should not underestimate the importance that being an oil producer has for the UK’s balance of payments, which, frankly, are not great as it is. If we have to rely more on imported oil and gas for our supply, it will further exacerbate that issue. If we miss the opportunities to further develop and support the supply chain, the ability to provide the project management, skills, expertise and technology will go with it as oil and gas is exploited in other, perhaps more favourable basins. The prizes are clear: jobs, energy security and support for our balance of payments and exports. Those huge prizes are there, and if the industry is given the right support, they can and will be obtained.

The Prime Minister has talked about building a bridge to the future, and that is necessary and required. The same turn of phrase has been used by my colleague, the Scottish Government’s Energy Minister, Fergus Ewing. We have left a period of very high oil prices, but as day follows night, oil prices will go up. None of us can predict when that will be, but at least until now it has been the case that they have always gone back up again. The difference in supply and demand that we are talking about is not huge, but the impacts that that has over a sustained period of time change the price and make it far more volatile and far lower.

It is a curious situation, but Aberdeen is probably one of the few places in Europe where the local radio stations tell their listeners what the oil price is. At the end of every bulletin, the newsreader will say something like, “Oil trades at $36 a barrel”—folk are happy with $36 a barrel, because it is better than the $29 a barrel it was at. That is strange, and on the face of it that seems like a slightly useless snippet of information, but it signifies how important the industry is to the city that I am proud to represent.

What would a tax cut do? It would provide the clearest signal that the Government can offer that they believe in the future of oil and gas and will do everything they can to ensure that that future is realised as well as possible. We are talking about a multibillion pound investment in a platform 40 or 50 miles out into the
North sea, and that is a significant investment. That investment is likely to have a lifespan well in excess of 20 years—potentially, it is 30 to 40 years. In the time that that field will be looking to make its money back, the oil price will go through many ups and downs, but when many international companies are looking across the globe at where to invest their ever-shrinking piles of capital—the oil industry globally is facing a crisis of investment—we need to be at the most competitive we can be. Part of that is the skills, innovation and expertise that I am absolutely certain we have, but that change in the headline rate of tax over the lifespan of a field can put the decision from being, “We do not proceed,” to, “Yes, let’s press the button and go ahead and develop this field.”

Reducing the headline rate of tax is the clearest single way that we can boost the efforts in exploration and in developing the fields that we know about, and it will provide the clearest way forward on the bridge to the future. It will require people to invest. Whether that is companies using the strength of their balance sheet—some are doing that, buying up other operators and such like—or whether it is borrowed money, if we can de-risk the investment decision as much as possible, there is a greater chance that someone will invest that money in the UK continental shelf, as opposed to one of the other basins.

Stuart Blair Donaldson: Does my hon. Friend agree with the assessment of Oil & Gas UK that to transform the basin, the UK continental shelf needs to become the most attractive mature oil and gas province in the world in which to do business? That is not just one of the most, but the most attractive place to do business.

Callum McCaig: I agree with my hon. Friend and Oil & Gas UK on that. The North sea, particularly at Aberdeen, benefits from being the best place to live to work in the oil and gas industry, but it needs to be the best place in terms of the assets and the tax regime.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the assessment of Oil & Gas UK that to transform the basin, the UK continental shelf needs to become the most attractive mature oil and gas province in the world in which to do business? That is not just one of the most, but the most attractive place to do business.

Callum McCaig: Yes, absolutely. The international creditworthiness of the companies is fundamental to their access to finance. Speaking to the financial providers and asking that they look favourably on the sector because it has the support of Government would have an automatic benefit for their creditworthiness. Were we to do that, it would be a win-win in the clearest sense.

We should be looking to do an awful lot more exploration, and reducing the headline rate of tax is the best way of doing that. There is undoubted potential to the west of Shetland and in the Atlantic margins, but we should not give up on the core parts of the North sea, whether that is the central North sea or the southern North sea. I met with representatives of Statoil earlier this week, and they were discussing a field where they have found 2.8 billion barrels of oil and gas. That is next to the Oseberg field in the Norwegian sector, but it is in one of the most heavily explored areas of the Norwegian continental shelf. The exploration that happened in large parts of the UK side of the line happened a long time ago. The advances, whether those are in drilling technology or seismic technology, mean that we should be looking to go back around some of the old ground to see what we have left there. There is a chance that there will be significant finds, and we need to ensure that that exploration is properly incentivised, so that the companies going out to look for oil and gas get as big a return as possible. That will make it economically viable.

The asks are on tax and access to finance, as we have heard. There is a key point on the transferability of tax liabilities when it comes to decommissioning. The ability to bring new players into the market is important. Each time there has been a downturn in the North sea, there has been a reconfiguration of the companies operating, and largely speaking that has been positive. We have gone from the big US companies to the majors to the middle-ranking players, and we are perhaps looking to go to smaller players still. Those at the cutting edge of innovation are the smallest companies. Their bread and butter is making the most of ageing or smaller fields. They can devote their time, expertise and capital to doing that and getting it right.

Finally, I want to talk about Aberdeen. It has felt the impact, and my hon. Friend the Members for Aberdeen North and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine have touched upon the impact on our constituents. It has been significant and for many of them it has been painful. However, on the investment made by both Governments, the city deal shows proper collaborative working. Although I am disappointed that it is not bigger, there is no politician who has ever represented anywhere ever who has not wanted more from the Government when it comes to financing. I recognise it is a significant commitment. The work to establish the oil and gas technology centre is a smart use of money and builds on the expertise that is already there within our universities, making sure that we make that box a little bit more clever.

Investment in infrastructure in Aberdeen is hugely important. When we discussed the issues of oil and gas a year or more ago at the beginning of the downturn, the previous head of Oil & Gas UK said that Aberdeen was part of the problem in terms of the competitiveness of the North sea and in terms of our infrastructure, both physical and digital. Steps are under way to put that right, but we cannot rest on our laurels, and we have to up the pace of investment in infrastructure to unleash the potential that Aberdeen has.

There has been much talk about the tax regime. Again, we welcome the efforts made in last year’s Budget. I read this morning that the head of Oil & Gas UK had described the tax cuts as “so last year”, but I think the headline writer has taken a bit of a liberty because, having read the article, I am disappointed to say that she did not say that. However, because she did not, I shall. What was done, although important, was done last year, and there need to be efforts this year. The Budget is coming upon us. It was welcome that a Treasury Minister was here for the opening remarks; he has not missed much by not staying to hear what I have to say.
I know the Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change, understands the industry and is well regarded there. I hope that she is having conversations with her colleagues in the Treasury around the same issues; I would expect nothing less.

Time is of the essence. We are at a crossroads here. There is a future for the North sea, and the Governments in Westminster and in Holyrood should make every effort to make sure that that future is the brightest possible. That requires action in the Budget and I very much hope that we will not be disappointed.

3.12 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) not only on securing this important debate, but on conducting it with such evident good sense. That is not something I always experience on occasions such as this, but everybody in the debate this afternoon has spoken the most extraordinary good sense about the circumstances of the North sea and its future, and what our imperatives should be over the next period to make sure we get the best possible out of the North sea for the long-term future.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) have emphasised, this is about jobs, about UK plc for the future and about the question of investment in a smart and different way that recognises the different realities of the North sea. It is about efficiency and making sure that the North sea remains a really good place to invest in because it works to the best of its capacity and ability for its own future. As hon. Members have reflected, circumstances are different now and will probably always be different. So we are not just talking about a circumstance of the moment; rather, this is something we need to think about for the much longer term.

I am not remotely as well versed in “Dallas” as the hon. Member for Waveney, but I recall that one particular series turned out to be a dream and they got on with business in subsequent series. That is not where we are now as far as the North sea is concerned. Obviously, we face circumstances right now in which, as hon. Members have reflected on, Brent crude is trading at the mighty high price now of $36 a barrel, up from $29 just recently, but it was $50 or so before the new year and much higher than that before then. Many industry experts are stating that that circumstance, albeit with some changes, is likely to remain with us for a long time to come. It is not thought likely that we will see sudden, volatile spikes and rising prices—that it will all turn out to be a dream and we will be back to business as it was. It is a different series of circumstances.

There is a second set of circumstances. The North sea is indeed a mature basin. That does not mean there is not a lot to do, not a lot to find, and not a lot to exploit. However, the reality is that we are two thirds to three quarters of the way through what is in the North sea, and what will be there for the future is likely to be of a different order from what has been there in the past. A recent Oil & Gas UK report looked at the number of marginal fields that were discovered some time ago and are still there waiting to be exploited, but which are not at the moment likely to be exploited, because there are infrastructure problems in terms of access to those small and marginal fields—there are most certainly considerable investment problems in getting people to invest in and exploit those fields in the way they should be over the next period. It is likely that the 300 discoveries that Oil & Gas UK talked about—mostly of under-50 million barrels of oil equivalent—will be followed by other small discoveries.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North is right that it is possible that there remain considerable discoveries within the areas that have already been exploited. I think it is possible, but it is probably more likely that there will be a large number of much smaller discoveries. We have to be clear about how we go about exploiting and supporting them, and making sure we get the best out of them over the next period. The hon. Member for Waveney emphasised that collaboration is absolutely essential over the future period. The assumptions made some while ago about who should do what to whom in relation to the North sea will be different. All sorts of collaboration will be needed, in equipment, infrastructure, joint working and standardisation. A whole range of things will be necessary to ensure that exploitation can be undertaken in the best possible way.

That also means something else—something that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth mentioned. He emphasised the question of asset transfer and how we should make things as easy as possible when existing assets have been under-utilised, or even when people have decided they no longer want to be part of the process. Not only should it not be difficult for asset transfers to take place; there should be mechanisms to make a transfer as smooth, efficient and productive as possible, so that the collaboration proceeds in the best way.

With a very mature field, there is the inevitable issue of decommissioning, which the hon. Member for Aberdeen North mentioned. On the one hand, bearing in mind that there is about £35 billion to £50 billion of decommissioning to be undertaken in the next period, there may be a temptation to say, “That is a new industry in its own right; let’s all get going on decommissioning. It will be important for jobs.” It will be important for jobs, but if there is an emphasis on decommissioning instead of the collaboration necessary to secure the exploitation of the fields in the next period, we will live to regret it fundamentally. That is precisely because, as the hon. Lady said, we have the benefit in the North sea, particularly in relation to exploiting additional small fields, of a mature infrastructure, which can come to the aid jointly of a number of the new discoveries and explorations. If in the mean time we decommission the nodes that would lead to that potential support, we will not just take away the installations; we will shoot ourselves firmly in the foot as far as future discoveries and activities are concerned.

I welcome what is being done under the aegis of the Oil and Gas Authority, which is being set up in its final form under the Energy Bill, towards ensuring that the process works well and that there is in the Bill proper consideration, before decommissioning is undertaken, of alternative uses for that infrastructure, and not just in future exploitation.
George Kerevan: On the point about decommissioning versus future exploration, the hon. Gentleman might like to know that Denmark has gone for the future development strategy, and this year had a successful seventh round of issuing new licences for prospecting in its sector of the North sea.

Dr Whitehead: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that information, which emphasises what the prospects can be if the process is undertaken carefully. I do not say that there should not be decommissioning, because clearly there will be a substantial amount to undertake, but it should be undertaken in the full knowledge of what is in store if it is not done carefully and of whether there may be different uses in future for elements of what is in the North sea, particularly for carbon capture and storage and gas storage. The infrastructure could assist with that in the future, establishing jobs and skills for the long term, when different circumstances may apply.

The theme that has come out of this afternoon’s debate on the future of the North sea is collaboration. As for what we and the Government should be doing, what has emerged is that support needs to be given now for careful investment in collaboration, and for establishing the circumstances for a bright future in the North sea, in the context I have set out. One of the investments that the Government have already considered is the question of joint seismic work for possible explorations, whose results will be publicly available—a point that highlights collaboration in exploration for the future. Investments and assistance with that approach in mind seem to me to be the most important way forward.

In the light of the good sense and harmony that have prevailed this afternoon, I should perhaps not venture down this route, but I wonder whether I should remind the House that as late as 2011 Her Majesty’s Treasury prevailed this afternoon, I should perhaps not venture down this route, but I wonder whether I should remind the House that as late as 2011 Her Majesty’s Treasury imposed a windfall tax on North sea oil and gas, by putting up the supplementary levy from 20% to 32%. One thing I must say to the Treasury about future arrangements and assistance for the North sea is: “Don’t do that ever again.”

Peter Aldous: I was a relatively new Member at the time and remember distinctly the unsettling impact that that measure had on the industry, because it came completely out of the blue. This is a risky business anyway, so it really knocked confidence. To be fair—I remember exactly what happened—the Treasury got the message from that very clearly. I remember attending the conference in Aberdeen that September, and the present Secretary of State for International Development, who was Economic Secretary to the Treasury, was surrounded by people from the industry. She brought the message back here, and it has been here ever since. We need to build on the new regime that we have had since then.

Dr Whitehead: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which reminds us of the circumstances in which that began and the lessons learned fairly early on. Certainly, over the past year or two the Government’s activity and their approach to taxation and investment in the North sea show that the lesson was taken on board. I just want to make sure that we build on it. We should bear in mind the need for investment, to bring new players into the field and ensure the longer-term certainty and security of those investments for the future. Perhaps some kind of floor and cap investment arrangement might be undertaken, whereby, should volatility return to the North sea, there would be guarantees for the Government and, if it does not, there would be guarantees for the investor.

We need to think about new forms of investment for new times in the North sea to make sure that its long-term legacy will be that it did its best for UK plc, both for the jobs and skills that now exist, which it is vital to retain, and in making sure that the UK was fuelled as well as possible. I hope that it will be entirely uncontroversial if I conclude by saying that we are engaged in a joint enterprise that it is in all our interests to get right.

3.29 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I echo the hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig) and for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) in saying that the good and unusual thing about this debate is that we are all on the same page. We all absolutely agree that the oil and gas industry is vital for the United Kingdom. It is currently in great difficulty, but we are all united in our determination to do everything we can to see it get through this period and continue to thrive.

I was slightly concerned to hear the hon. Member for Southampton, Test raise the question of joint enterprise and mention “Dallas” in the same speech. We will of course all remember the question, “Who shot J. R.?”; I would not like to think that there was any joint enterprise whatever.

Callum McCaig: I should make it clear to the Minister that some of us are not old enough to remember “Dallas”. [Laughter.]

Andrea Leadsom: I take that extremely personally. That is going to cost the hon. Gentleman chocolate raisins in our next debate—he knows what I mean. I am watching him very closely.

Like other Members, I was delighted that my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury was able to join us for much of the debate and hear the views of several Members on the needs of this important sector. The North sea is a mature basin, yet it is still meeting the equivalent of around 65% of the UK’s oil demand and 55% of its gas demand. As many Members have said, there is no doubt that oil and gas will remain central to the UK’s energy mix as we make the transition to a low-carbon economy in a cost-effective way for consumers, so investing in domestic oil and gas production is essential. It helps to reduce our reliance on energy imports and provides a significant input to our economy, supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs directly and indirectly.

As all speakers have pointed out, over the past year oil prices have continued to fall, dropping to below $30 a barrel earlier this year. The impact of the fall on the industry was reported last week in Oil & Gas UK’s annual activity survey, which also indicates that investment in new projects has fallen from approximately £8 billion
a year over the past five years to an expected £1 billion in the coming year, and that the number of wells drilled to explore for new reserves is low. It is therefore vital that industry and Government step up and respond to the challenges facing the industry.

I assure all Members that the Government are committed in their support for the industry and have already made significant changes to the fiscal regime. In the March 2015 Budget, the Chancellor introduced a £1.3 billion package of reforms, including reductions to headline rates of tax, a new investment allowance and £20 million of funding for seismic surveys to support exploration. In fact, no other Government have made fiscal changes as extensive as the UK’s in response to falling oil prices. Both the Government and the Oil and Gas Authority will continue to listen to the industry’s views on further reforms in this area, but, as the Wood review made clear, fiscal changes are not the only solution to the issues the industry currently faces.

Several Members, including the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), spoke about the need for fiscal measures to be taken in the next Budget. I hope that he and others were reassured by the presence of my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary. The changes announced in the 2015 Budget were obviously significant. Several large projects have already gone ahead as a result of them, such as Maersk’s Culzean project—an investment of £3 billion in the UK, supporting 6,000 jobs—and BP’s eastern trough area project, which is a £670 million investment. In response to the March 2015 Budget package, the then CEO of Oil & Gas UK, Malcolm Webb, said:

“These measures send exactly the right signal to investors. They properly reflect the needs of this maturing oil and gas province and will allow the UK to compete internationally for investment.”

That is what we were setting out to achieve, and I think those measures were very well received.

Members have highlighted what the industry is asking for: that we address the remaining fiscal barriers to late-life activity; that we abolish the supplementary charge, or at least reduce it by 10%; that we bring the rate of the investment allowance for offshore expenditure in line with that for onshore expenditure; that we temporarily remove all special taxes from exploration, so that only basic corporation tax will apply for all discoveries made over the next five years for the whole life of the field; and that we introduce a Government loan guarantee.

The Government have been building on the evidence gathered at working groups that met over autumn 2015. The Treasury, supported by the OGA, is conducting internal analysis of the findings of the three workstreams on barriers to exploration, infrastructure access and new entrants for late-life assets. As usual, should the Chancellor make any decisions, the announcement and implementation of any changes to the tax regime will follow the fiscal policy-making process. I hope that that reassures Members, but they should understand that I cannot make any further comments. It is not a matter for me anyway, but the Budget is coming the week after next.

In addition to looking into and undertaking further fiscal reform, the Government are supporting the industry in a number of other ways. The OGA has been established as an independent regulator and asset steward for the UK continental shelf. The Energy Bill before Parliament will provide the OGA with the powers it needs to maximise the economic recovery of oil and gas from the continental shelf. The OGA is working with the industry to identify opportunities to reduce costs, and good progress has already been made, with Oil & Gas UK’s recent activity survey showing that production rose by 10% in 2015, while production costs fell by a third. That is an impressive achievement.

As the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) pointed out, we have recently re-established the cross-party oil and gas group, and we are aiming to promote the competitiveness of the offshore fabrication sector. Our first meeting, in January, was very productive. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), the hon. Member for North Tyneside and other Members for their involvement in the forum. As the hon. Lady mentioned, our next meeting will be with fabricators, and we will be looking at new opportunities not only in the traditional oil and gas sector but outside it.

Supporting the industry’s supply chain is crucial at this time, as it is a vital and integral part of the UK oil and gas industry. As those Members who have constituents who work in the industry and others who themselves have worked in the industry will know, it has suffered job losses and revenues falling by around a quarter last year. We must acknowledge that. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) asked whether enough is being done about job losses. I can tell her that in intergovernmental ministerial meetings, and particularly in the work I am doing with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, we are examining what more can be done to view the energy sector holistically to see how job losses in the oil and gas sector can be a win, not only for offshore and onshore wind but, for example, for the new nuclear efforts. We are looking at what more can be done to provide new opportunities in the energy sector.

Despite the low oil price and the downturn of work being contracted offshore, there are steps we can take to support our supply chain and put it in the best position to win contracts. The OGA is actively involved in promoting future success through its supply chain strategy and board, for which unlocking new investment and future work is a priority. The OGA is working closely with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and with industry to make sure that companies remain competitive. The Government are working to further develop mechanisms to provide greater transparency about upcoming business opportunities to companies in the supply chain.

I am delighted to be able to inform Members that over the past few days I have held meetings with several offshore wind developers to emphasise to them that I want to see them do more to make the industrialisation of the UK offshore wind supply chain happen. In particular, the industry needs to work collaboratively to deliver a UK jacket foundation solution and competitive UK tower solutions. Successful delivery of towers and jacket foundations will create opportunities for fabricators and enable people with the right skills to transfer across to the offshore wind sector.
In the past 48 hours, I have met a couple of developers, one of whom told me that they have been very successful in winning overseas offshore wind business by using onshore Aberdeen-based oil and gas consultants with expertise in engineering, if hon. Members can follow that tortuous thought process. Rather than using offshore wind consultants, wherever they are based, they are using the UK’s long-established expertise in onshore oil and gas to win overseas wind business. That is important, and we need to do more to promote that interesting opportunity.

I am working with my hon. Friend the Minister for Skills to develop a national college for wind energy to provide people with the right skills to work in the sector.

I had a meeting yesterday with a number of hon. Members from across the House to talk about what more we can do to get it up and running. Retraining is required if we are to take the people who lose opportunities in the oil and gas sector into offshore and onshore wind and other renewables sectors. There is a big opportunity there.

The UK has a strong record on manufacturing jackets and topsides for offshore wind substations. The majority of those items are manufactured in the UK. Sembmarine SLP Ltd, which won a contract from Siemens Transmission and Distribution in 2014 to design, engineer, procure, project manage and construct its platform’s jacket substructure and topside, has begun fabrication. The offshore transformer station, which is being constructed at SLP’s yard at Lowestoft on the Suffolk coast, is providing work for up to 300 employers for the next 21 months. I encourage all hon. Members—[I know they are already doing this]—to work with Ministers, cross-party groups and the OGA to look at other opportunities in the energy sector, not only on direct workforce re-engagement but on supply chain opportunities. That is really important. The Government and the OGA are continuing to work with initiatives such as the Scottish energy jobs taskforce and the New Anglia local enterprise partnership to support those who have already, sadly, lost their jobs. We need to continue that work.

In addition to those measures, during his visit to Aberdeen in January, the Prime Minister announced a package of measures to support the industry, including £20 million of Government funding for a second round of new seismic surveys to unlock new exploration activity in the UK continental shelf, which is the lifeblood of the basin. That funding, together with the OGA’s flexible and pragmatic licensing strategy for frontier and mature acreage, is designed proactively to influence and incentivise exploration on the UKCS. To back genuine innovation, the data from those new surveys will be made publicly available and £1 million will be allocated to fund innovative uses of data to unlock new fields. That additional investment will help to accelerate the drilling of new wells, which will replenish our reserves and lead to new infrastructure projects.

In addition, £70,000 is to be invested in the development of world-class 3D visualisation facilities at the Lyell centre at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. The appointment of a new oil and gas ambassador will help to ensure the best possible access for UK companies to markets overseas, promote the North sea around the world and boost inward investment. The new strategy to maximise the economic recovery of offshore oil and gas in the UK will, subject to the will of Parliament, come into force soon. I share the sense of urgency of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney, who rightly pointed out that that needs to happen as soon as possible.

In addition to all those measures, Innovate UK is set to launch an energy game-changer, which will make £1.5 million available to encourage innovators, microbusinesses and small and medium-sized enterprises from outside the energy sector to come up with radical solutions and disruptive technologies in response to challenges set by the energy industry. The Natural Environment Research Council will also allocate an additional £1 million investment in the successful oil and gas centre for doctoral training, led by Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. Aberdeen University is another core partner. That further investment will enable the programme to be extended for another year and will take the total number of PhD students funded under the scheme to 120 by 2017.

The Government are committed to supporting regional development. Aberdeen is Europe’s energy capital, and has rightly received a package of investment through the Aberdeen city region deal, which included funding for an oil and gas technology centre that will help to strengthen the UK’s position as a global centre of expertise for offshore oil and gas and encourage future investment in the UK. However, that is not the only area that contributes to the industry. Although Scotland supports 45% of the UK’s oil and gas jobs, largely in and around Aberdeen, 55% are located in England, with concentrations in the south-east, the north-west, the west midlands and the north-east. Those areas all support thousands of highly skilled and well-paid jobs. I was very pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning was able to join us for part of the debate and that he lent his support for our doing all we can to ensure the success of the sector. It is crucial that we have a joined-up approach across the Government, the OGA, industry and the regions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney made clear, the southern North sea off the coast of the east of England is a vital part of our industry. For that reason, we are moving forward with our regional development plans. This year, the OGA will carry out an evaluation of the potential for transforming the southern North sea into an energy hub.

As many hon. Members pointed out, although the industry faces challenges, we must remember that there are still opportunities out there. It is definitely not all doom and gloom. As Sir Ian Wood pointed out recently, there is still a huge prize out there. There are still up to another 20 billion barrels of oil equivalent to recover, and 10 new developments will come online in the next two years, which will create much-needed jobs. There is a strong portfolio of new projects in the planning stage just waiting for an upturn in the oil price.

**Kirsty Blackman:** Sir Ian Wood also said recently that we needed drastic changes to the fiscal regime to ensure the oil and gas industry’s future.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for reminding us of that. The Budget is coming up soon, and I am sure Ministers are listening to what she has to say.
Production on the UK continental shelf rose by 10% in 2015 to 1.64 million barrels of oil equivalent a day. Almost 43 billion barrels of oil equivalent has been recovered so far, and there are up to 20 billion barrels—about a third—to be recovered. The UK remains the second largest producer of oil in Europe after Norway, and the third largest producer of gas after Norway and the Netherlands. The UK remains in the top 25 of global producers of oil and gas—for oil we were 21st in 2014, and for gas we were 22nd in 2014—despite the decline in production in recent years. The opportunities remain, and we still have every chance of success.

Although we wish to avoid premature decommissioning, it is a big business opportunity for the future, and £1 billion is already being spent per year. Many suspended wells are waiting to be permanently abandoned. We hope to stimulate that market and, in doing so, provide a valuable market for the supply chain. The OGA will publish a UKCS decommissioning strategy that will enable the UK service sector to become a hub for decommissioning and help UK firms to be ready to capitalise on the huge opportunities that are coming in the years ahead. That will be supported by the National Environmental Research Council, which is also investing up to £1 million in a cohort of new projects to support the development of expertise in the UK on decommissioning and its environmental management. With that proactive approach, we seek to position the UK so that it can be an early mover in that emerging market and establish a highly competitive and capable new sector.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney and the hon. Members for North Tyneside and for Aberdeen North for bringing this important debate to the House. The discussion has been constructive and I have listened with enormous interest to what right hon. and hon. Members have had to say. I congratulate the hon. Members for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson), but particularly the hon. Member for Livingston. She has a huge amount of experience in the oil and gas sector and it was interesting to hear her contribution. The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine spoke of the importance of oil and gas to Aberdeenshire, but their importance has also been made clear by Members representing other areas.

There is no doubt that the industry is facing particularly testing times, not only in the UK but globally. As I have outlined, the Government are working hard with the Oil and Gas Authority and the industry to provide the right support to this vital sector during the current oil price crisis. There is of course more to be done, and I assure right hon. and hon. Members that the Government will continue to do all they can to support this great British industry during these challenging times.

3.50 pm

Peter Aldous: This has been a collaborative debate, so we are hopefully starting off here as things will move on. Over the past 50 years, we have perhaps taken the industry and what it produces in terms of our energy security for granted, and I sense that the Treasury automatically ticks off an enormous great dividend from the industry in the Budget every year. Then, when we have a shock to the system, we suddenly realise how important the industry is to the UK. We also need to focus on how important it is to the areas that are represented around this Chamber. If we do not get it right, we will hollow out those communities. The area that I represent is perhaps a little better off than other areas, in that our economy is a little more diversified, but the effects could nevertheless hit hard if we do not get this right.

The foundations have been laid over the last 18 months or so. The Treasury is in listening mode and my hon. Friend the Minister from DECC is in listening mode. They get it. The setting up of the Oil and Gas Authority has been so important. The Budget 2015 laid down some important foundations, and the Prime Minister delivered the right measures and packages during his visit to Aberdeen in January. I know that we cannot say much about the Budget that is coming up in two weeks, but it is important for the future of the industry that we get both the short-term measures we need to get through this particular challenge and retain the infrastructure, and the clear long-term message that this is the place to invest. People have invested here over the last 50 years and we want them to invest with confidence over the next 25 to 30 years.

I picked out three themes from today’s debate. The first is the importance of finance and bringing the banks with us. Secondly, innovation will be important moving forward. The industry has been innovative over the last year or so. It perhaps took things a little bit for granted up until then and was not the industry that it should have been, but it has responded. I listened at the conference in Norwich yesterday and the industry is full of ideas for moving forward. Finally, we need to send out a message of collaboration. I see the fabrication yards in my constituency daily—I suspect that the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) and the right hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) see such things daily, too—but they go from feast to famine. I see the marvellous things being built and the lights shining on them at night. It makes me feel good; and then, all of a sudden, they are gone. We go from feast to famine too often. If we can build a spirit of collaboration, we could perhaps get the yards to have a steady book of orders. They could then invest in skills and infrastructure to make themselves world class. That is what we need to achieve.

If we look at this in terms of seasons, I sense that oil and gas production on the UKCS has rapidly moved out of summer and now faces autumn. Perhaps one good thing about climate change is that we get Indian summers. We want to secure a long Indian summer for the industry—Indian summers sometimes last into November. What I do not want is a harsh, bleak winter arriving too early.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the offshore oil and gas industry.

3.55 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statements

Monday 22 February 2016

JUSTICE

Grants of Probate

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): On 18 February, the Government published a consultation paper proposing new fees for applications for grants of probate.

In the spending review the Ministry of Justice was allocated £700 million investment in Her Majesty’s Court and Tribunal Service (‘HMCTS’). This will transform our courts and tribunals, reducing complexity in language, processes and systems; helping people reach the best resolution for them; minimising the steps that people need to go through to obtain justice; and improving access to justice. We will invest in better facilities and use technology to reduce paperwork, so that we create a courts and tribunals service fit for the modern age.

At the same time, we must reduce the burden on the taxpayer of running our courts and tribunals. In meeting our spending review settlement, all parts of the Ministry of Justice must contribute to the national effort to reduce the deficit and restore the Government’s finances to surplus. The courts and tribunals service cost £1.8 billion in 2014/15, but only £700 million was received in income. This leaves a net cost to the taxpayer of around £1.1 billion in one year alone.

Our consultation on probate applications sets out reforms designed to increase income for a more sustainable courts and tribunals service and to introduce a more progressive fees regime. Probate applications are currently charged a fee of £155 if made by a solicitor and £215 if paid by an individual (“personal applications”). These fees apply to estates worth £5,000 or more. We propose raising this threshold from £5,000 to £50,000, lifting 30,000 estates out of the need to pay a probate fee altogether. The proportion of estates paying no fee would rise to 57%.

Above that threshold, we propose that the probate fee increases in line with the value of the estate. Estates worth over £50,000 but below £300,000 would see their fee rise to £300, a modest increase of £85 on the current maximum fee of £215. 84% of estates would pay £300 or nothing and 94% of estates would pay £1000 or less. The maximum fee of £20,000 would only be paid by the very wealthiest estates, worth more than £2 million. The fee would never exceed 1% of the value of the estate and in many cases it would be considerably less.

We also want to see a simpler, more streamlined process for probate applications, moving from a paper-based to an online system. This will make the probate service much easier to navigate so the experience of the bereaved is as simple and hassle-free as possible, reducing worry for executors at a time that is often very difficult and distressing time, and enabling most applications to be completed online and, we hope, without expensive professional advice.

These proposals are progressive, with lower value estates lifted out of paying any fee at all and other estates only paying more as the value of the estate increases. They are also necessary, making a significant contribution to reducing the deficit and enabling investment which will transform the courts and tribunals service.

Court fees are never popular but they are necessary if we are, as a nation, to live within our means. These proposals would raise around an additional £250 million a year, which is a critical contribution to cutting the deficit and reducing the burden on the taxpayer of running the courts tribunals.

Full details of the Government’s proposals are set out in the consultation document which has published on the website at: www.gov.uk.

HM Courts and Tribunals Service

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): On 19 February the Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor wrote to the Chair of the Justice Select Committee to inform him of two issues concerning Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service (‘HMCTS’): one relating to Form E1 and the other relating to community penalty breach warrant processing errors.

As a result of further extensive investigations to establish the cause of the Form E error, my officials have alerted me to a further calculator problem in a past version of another form, Form E1.

Form E1 is the form that parties must use to disclose financial information in certain kinds of financial proceedings, including proceedings for financial provision for children that fall outside the statutory maintenance scheme. Form E1 is used in a much smaller number of proceedings than Form E.

This fault meant that the automatic calculator in the form calculated the wrong total for an individual’s net assets by failing to deduct certain liabilities.

The investigation found the faulty formula was present in the version of Form E1 that was available on the HMCTS Form Finder website between April 2011 and March 2012.

HMCTS has conducted a search on a set of 459 cases that have a record of a financial application or a reference to Form E1 having been filed during this period. Where Form E1s were found, they were checked to see if they were the HMCTS version containing the calculator error, and if so whether the error was present. Three Form E1s have been identified as containing the calculation error.

While we are confident that the trawl has captured the vast majority of cases that could have been affected by the error, anyone concerned about their case can write to us and their case will be checked. Following the Form E error coming to light, HMCTS established a dedicated email address which people could use if they were concerned about their own case: formE@hmcts.gsi.gov.uk. Those who wish to contact us about Form E1 should use this same email address.

Although the faulty form was used in these cases, it would not necessarily have had any effect on the ultimate outcome. Form E1 is only a part of the material used by the parties and the court and is used at an early stage, so the information is often disputed or superseded by further information introduced during proceedings.
We have instructed HMCTS to write to all parties in the three cases identified. The letter will express our sincere regret, set out what happened and explain that, although Form E1 is just one part of the evidence used in their case, there remains a possibility that the error affected the final outcome.

The letter will set out options available to people involved in these cases. They may wish to do nothing, if, for example, they know that the error was corrected during the proceedings or they do not wish to re-open their cases. If they think they have been affected by this error then they can apply to the court to vary or set aside their order. My officials consulted the president of the Family Division about the court rules and procedures that would apply to such applications or for any other proceedings that might be open to the parties. My officials are also consulting the president on the development of a specific form for such applications. We will provide a link to the new form in our letter to the parties, as well as guidance on how to complete the form.

We have instructed that no court fee will be charged for making this application, and this will also be made clear in the letter from HMCTS.

The current version of Form E1 has the correct calculator functionality and we will also consider the future of Form E1 as part of our broader court reforms.

With regard to community penalty breach warrants, on Tuesday 26 January, I was alerted to an error in the processing of an individual breach warrant by HMCTS.

A community penalty breach warrant is issued when an individual has failed to attend court to answer why they have not complied with the conditions of, for example, a community or suspended sentence. In some circumstances, individuals may be remanded in custody following a breach of their order.

The effect of a breach warrant not being processed properly can be that notification that a warrant has been issued to arrest an individual is either sent late to the arresting authority or not sent at all.

Following this individual case, HMCTS immediately began an urgent investigation into whether this was an isolated incident or more widespread. Initial local checks into all 725 'live' breach warrants in the Greater Manchester area discovered that a further 51 breach warrants had been processed incorrectly. Those errors were due to processes being disapplied or ignored by specific members of HMCTS staff in the Greater Manchester area.

Immediate steps have been taken to ensure that proper procedures are now being followed in Greater Manchester and action has been taken against all members of staff identified as responsible for these errors. All of the 52 warrants have since been processed correctly and have either been actioned or are in the process of being actioned by the enforcing authority.

Given the potentially serious repercussions of breach warrants not being properly processed, HMCTS then instigated detailed and thorough investigations across the whole of England and Wales to see if the problems in Greater Manchester had also occurred elsewhere. A total of 4,054 live warrants (including those in Greater Manchester) have been checked in 200 issuing courts across the country—including every warrant issued over the last month. Those checks have identified a further 69 errors nationally, including 47 in the London region.

Investigations are now examining the reasons for error in all 69 cases outside of Greater Manchester, and are particularly focused on why a disproportionate number appear to have occurred in London.

Early findings have already made clear that the majority of the errors in London were due to a change in process and personnel that had been addressed by the end of January 2016.

Immediate detailed assurance is being carried out of local processes to ensure that all community penalty breach warrants are sent to the appropriate enforcement authority, and an in-depth audit is being carried out in London and Greater Manchester to assure their processes independently. The relevant standard operating procedures are being strengthened as a matter of urgency, and best practice that has been identified through the investigations undertaken will be shared and implemented across the country. Appropriate action will be taken in respect of all staff members who have made errors, consistent with the approach taken in Greater Manchester.

HMCTS will report to me as soon as possible on the reasons for each individual error across the country and will also recommend whether more action should be taken to the steps outlined above in order to eliminate the possibility of further errors occurring in future. These mistakes are deeply regrettably and I sincerely apologise to anyone who may have been affected.

[HCWS540]
Written Statements

Tuesday 23 February 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Single Departmental Plans


The plans set out how Departments will deliver the Government’s programme for this Parliament. They include each Department’s priority objectives, the key programmes and policies that will deliver these, together with a number of performance indicators. They also set out the common efficiency measures that Departments will be undertaking in order to deliver the Government’s commitments in full within the resources available.

Single departmental plans are owned by Departments and have been designed by Cabinet Office and HM Treasury working in partnership.

Statistical information published in the plans will be updated as new data becomes available.

[HCWS543]

TREASURY

ECOFIN; 12 February 2016

The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council was held in Brussels on 12 February 2016. Ministers discussed the following items:

Anti-tax avoidance package

The Commission presented its proposals for tackling corporate tax avoidance, including implementing the UK Government’s country by country reporting template for multinationals. This was followed by an exchange of views. The UK intervened to welcome the package and to urge EU Ministers to go further, including seeking a multilateral agreement on making details of the tax paid by companies publicly available on a country by country basis.

Current legislative proposals

The presidency updated the Council on the state of play of financial services dossiers.

Implementation of the banking union

The Commission provided a brief update on several dossiers linked to the banking union: the single resolution fund, the bank recovery and resolution directive and the deposit guarantee scheme directive.

Fight against the financing of terrorism

The Commission presented its action plan to reinforce the European framework in the fight against the financing of terrorism. Following an exchange of views, the Council adopted conclusions on the new measures.

Preparation of the G20 meeting in Shanghai on 25-27 February 2016

The Council adopted the EU’s terms of reference ahead of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and central bank governors in Shanghai.

Discharge to be given to the Commission in respect of the implementation of the budget for 2014

On the basis of a report from the Court of Auditors, the Council voted on the discharge to be given to the Commission in respect of the implementation of the EU’s general budget for the financial year 2014. The UK voted against, alongside Sweden and the Netherlands.

Budget guidelines for 2017

Council conclusions were adopted on the EU budget guidelines for 2017. These will inform the Commission of high-level priorities in preparation of the draft budget.

High-level group on own resources

Mario Monti, the chair of the high-level group on own resources, provided a state of play update on the EU’s financing system, followed by a short exchange of views.

[HCWS544]

International Monetary Fund: UK Subscription

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): On 23 February, the UK will increase its quota subscription to the IMF by 9,416.6 million special drawing rights (SDRs), equivalent to £9,270.2 million using exchange rates on 22 February 2016. This raises the UK’s total quota subscription from 10,738.5 million SDRs to 20,155.1 million SDRs.

On 20 January 2016, a sufficiency of IMF members notified the IMF of the completion of relevant legislative procedures to implement resolution 66-2 of the Board of Governors of the IMF (DEP2011-0977), thereby bringing increases to IMF members’ quota subscriptions envisaged by that resolution into effect. Parliamentary approval in the UK for implementation of resolution 66-2 was secured via the International Monetary Fund (Increase in Subscription) Order 2011, which came into force on 19 July 2011.

On the same day as the UK increases its quota subscription, two temporary loan facilities with the IMF will change. These facilities act as a second line of defence behind quotas. The UK’s commitment to the new arrangements to borrow will roll back by 9,178.2 million SDRs—equivalent to £9,035.5 million—and a bilateral loan commitment of the same value will become effective.

Worldwide quota increases form part of a wider reform package which makes the IMF stronger and more legitimate. It is vital at this time that we have an IMF equipped to strengthen the resilience of the global economy against risks and spillovers.

An SDR is the unit of account used by the IMF. Its value is calculated daily as a weighted average of the US dollar, euro, yen and pound sterling.

[HCWS542]
UK’s Counter-terrorist Asset Freezing Regime

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAFA 2010), the Treasury is required to report to Parliament, quarterly, on its operation of the UK’s asset freezing regime mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1373.

This is the 17th report under the Act and it covers the period from 1 October 2015 to 31 December 2015. This report also covers the UK implementation of the UN Al-Qaida asset freezing regime and the operation of the EU asset freezing regime in the UK under EU regulation (EC) 2580/2001 which implements UNSCR 1373 against external terrorist threats to the EU. Under the UN Al-Qaida asset freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the Al-Qaida (Asset-Freezing) Regulations 2011. Under EU regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and the Treasury has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under part 1 of TAFA 2010.

Annexes A and B to this statement provide a breakdown, by name, of all those designated by the UK and the EU in pursuance of UN Security Council resolution 1373. The two individuals subject to designations, which have been notified on a restricted and confidential basis, under sections 3 and 10 of TAFA 2010 are denoted by A and B.

The following table sets out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during the quarter ending 31 December 2015:
Groups and Entities

Persons
1. Khalid MISHAAL
2. Khalid Shaikh MOHAMMED
3. Abdul Reza SHAHLAI
4. Ali Gholam SHAKURI
5. Qasem SOLEIMANI

Entities
1. Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)
2. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)
3. Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)
4. Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation
5. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)
6. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—(PFLP)
7. Sendero Luminoso (SL)

Annex B: Persons designated by the EU under Council Regulation (EC)2580/2001
1. Hamed ABDOLLAHI*
2. Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER*
3. Ibrahim Salihi AL YACOUB*
4. Mansoor ARBABSIAR*
5. Mohammed BOUYERI
6. Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN*
7. Khalid Shaikh MOHAMMED*
8. Abdul Reza SHAHLAI*
9. Ali Gholam SHAKURI*
10. Qasem SOLEIMANI*

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I represented the UK at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 15 February in Brussels.

Before lunch, a brief overview was given by the Chair of the Council, the Netherlands Minister for Agriculture, presented the work programme for the duration of the Dutch presidency. It focused on the key areas of food security, the future of the common agriculture policy, plant breeders’ rights and patent rights, antimicrobial resistance, market situations, and sustainable fisheries.

Commissioner Vella introduced the first agenda item on establishing an animal welfare platform—a paper which was put forward by Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands. The Council broadly supported this, which would allow experts to further exchange best practice and harmonise data and animal welfare across all member states. France stressed the need to include animal welfare standards in future international trade negotiations.

Before lunch, a brief overview was given by the President of the Council on the antimicrobial resistance conference which took place in Amsterdam on 9 and 10 February. The UK, Denmark and Slovenia supported making this issue a priority.

After lunch, Commissioner Hogan updated the Council on EU trade and ongoing negotiations. He highlighted that EU exports were 6% higher than the previous year and that he was continuing to support sectors by increasing export promotions funding, diversifying and increasing
EU trade partners and capitalising on opportunities in emerging economies. The Commissioner set out his ambitions to diversify and increase EU trade with a number of countries including China, Japan and the USA and he updated the Council on his recent visits to Colombia and Mexico. He also highlighted the recent success at the World Trade Organisation conference in Nairobi.

I supported the Commissioner in calling for ambitious trade and pushed further consideration of animal welfare in free trade agreements. This was echoed by a number of other member states.

Lastly, Commissioner Hogan summarised the conference on agricultural research held in Brussels on 26-28 January 2016. Many member states intervened welcoming the development and direction of the strategy.

The following were AOB items on the agenda:

- Poland tabled a non-paper detailing their concerns on the extension of the restricted area for African swine fever, and called for additional support to the Ukraine to manage the spread of the disease. This was supported by nine other member states.
- Poland and Spain led the discussion on agricultural markets highlighting the challenges in the pigmeat, dairy, fruit and vegetable sectors. This led in to a closed ministerial lunch discussion.

**HOME DEPARTMENT**

**Justice and Home Affairs Pre-Council Statement**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): A meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council will be held on 25 February, which I will attend on behalf of the UK.

The Council will begin with a discussion of the proposed draft regulation regarding the reinforcement of checks against relevant databases at external borders, including a policy debate and agreement to a general approach. Where systematic checks against databases would cause a disproportionate delay at the border, there is an option in the proposal to instead make checks on a targeted basis at land and sea borders only. Some member states would like air borders to be included in this option. While the UK does not participate in the border control elements of Schengen, we have a strong interest in improving the security of the EU’s external border, and I will stress the need for the measure to cover systematic checks at airports and push for Schengen and non-Schengen states to be able to exchange immigration information.

This will be followed by a debate on the proposed draft regulation on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Given the UK’s position in relation to Schengen, we will not participate in this measure, but I will again stress the need to improve the management of the external border.

Finally, there will be a substantive discussion on migration, where EU member states will evaluate the current situation as regards the implementation of measures taken by the EU to address the migration crisis. The discussion will also consider what future action the EU should take. This discussion is likely to be informed by the Commission communication on the state of play on the implementation of the European agenda on migration—published 10 February. I will intervene to reinforce key messages on securing the external EU border, effective implementation of “hotspots” in Greece and Italy, and minimising pull factors: if the EU is to avoid a repeat of last year, we must take decisive action now.

**ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE**

Electoral Registers

Mr Gary Streeter (Representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission): The Electoral Commission has today published a report on its analysis of the December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain and its assessment of the individual electoral registration (IER) activities carried out by electoral registration officers (EROs) during the annual canvass.

EROs were required by law to publish their revised register by 1 December 2015 except in cases where there was a by-election in their area during the period of the canvass (1 July to 1 December 2015), in which case the publication of the register could have been postponed until up to 1 February 2016.

The size of the parliamentary electorate in Great Britain on 1 December 2015 was 43,478,635. This represents a decrease of approximately 1% since December 2014/March 2015, and of 3% since February/March 2014, when the last revised registers compiled under the old system were published.

It is important to note that the 1 December publication date represents a snapshot of the registers at that time, and that 1.3 million applications to register have been made since this date following significant registration activity across the UK in advance of the elections in May 2016. The Electoral Commission will also run a national public awareness campaign, supported by a range of partners.

In June 2015, the Commission reported that 1.9 million entries on the May 2015 electoral registers had been retained from the previous household registers. Following a significant amount of work by EROs and their staff since then, including a comprehensive household canvass, the number removed from the registers at the end of the transition period was reduced to approximately 770,000, though the Commission notes that this does not include data from the London borough of Hackney as they were unable to provide an accurate figure. This represented 1.7% of the electorate overall, although this varies considerably by local authority. The Commission’s report analyses this in more detail.

It is not possible to estimate the total number of eligible electors, still resident at the same address, who were removed from the registers. However, it is likely that some of the entries that were removed related to electors who were eligible to remain registered to vote. Although there was no legal requirement for EROs to write to those removed from the revised register, the Commission’s guidance to EROs has previously...
recommended that EROs do so, given the important elections taking place across Great Britain in May 2016. The Commission notes that a small number of EROs may have left unconfirmed electors on their registers when published on 1 December and that these are being looked into further by the Commission and the Cabinet Office.

The Commission reports that there remains an issue with the number of registered attainers in particular. There were 276,185 attainers on the December 2015 parliamentary registers, which represents a fall of 40% in the number of registered attainers since February/March 2014. This decline would indicate that the requirement for attainers to register individually under IER, rather than be registered by a parent or guardian, is having a negative impact on the number registered.

The Commission sets out a number of options for reversing this decline in the report.

The Commission’s view is that considerable challenges remain that will continue to have a significant impact on the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers in the future. The report published today outlines the most significant of these and highlights the opportunities the Commission thinks can be taken to ensure they are appropriately addressed in the future. These include measures to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of EROs’ activities and to modernise the registration process in support of the vision recently set out by the Government.

The Commission notes that it has encountered several issues in obtaining accurate register data and key headline statistics from Cabinet Office and electoral management software (EMS) suppliers.

The Commission specifically identified errors in the headline electorate figures for 1 December 2015 that were reported to Cabinet Office by customers of two of the software suppliers. As a result, when quoting national electorate figures, the Commission has used the electorate statistics collected by the national statistical agencies as part of their official electoral statistics collection.

For the other data presented in this report the Commission has used the data supplied to Cabinet Office and confirmed the figures with the relevant EROs. The Commission is confident that the national-level aggregated data provide an accurate picture of the overall state of the December 2015 registers in Great Britain.

However, given the late receipt of much of the data requested, the remaining problems with some data and concerns raised by some EROs, there are significant limitations on the analysis of specific data and at a local authority level in general.

The transition to IER is now complete, but being able to collect accurate and useful registration data from EROs will be an ongoing requirement for the Commission, and it is also important for each individual ERO to be able to call on this data to assess their own activities. The Commission intends to continue working closely with Cabinet Office and the EMS suppliers in the future in order to help improve the data produced by their systems.

Overall, the transition to IER in Great Britain has been managed well by EROs. Assessments against performance standard 2, which requires that EROs deliver their strategies and use available data to monitor progress and make amendments to their plans where necessary to ensure they remain appropriate, have been impacted by the late receipt of data and, therefore, the process has not yet concluded. However, the Commission has reached an assessment that one ERO, for the London borough of Hackney, did not meet performance standard 2. The final set of performance assessments will be made available in the summer.

At the same time, the Commission will release its final report on the transition to IER when it publishes a full accuracy and completeness of the December 2015 registers. The findings from the study will be assessed against comparable data on the last revised registers compiled under household registration in February/March 2014, when the Commission estimated the Great Britain registers to be 87% accurate and 85% complete.

Copies of the Commission’s report have been placed in the Library and it is also available on the Commission’s website: www.electoralcommission.org.uk.
Written Statements

Thursday 25 February 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Informal Foreign Affairs Council (Trade)

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Trade and Investment (Lord Maude of Horsham) has today made the following statement.

I represented the UK at the informal EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) in Amsterdam on 2 February 2016. A summary of those main discussions follows.

China Market Economy Status (MES)

Trade Commissioner Malmstrom presented the arguments on both sides of the EU granting China “market economy status” (MES) within the WTO and set out how to do so would change the methodology for calculating new anti-dumping measures. The Commission would carry out further impact assessment work on this matter and continue to consider the different approaches the EU could take to granting MES to China.

Discussion revolved around the need for good evidence gathering and analysis, and consideration of how to protect a sufficiently wide range of EU industries going forward from any unfair competition.

I said that if we wanted China to abide by its international obligations, then we needed to do the same. That said, the EU was right to continue to explore how to tackle unfair trade and to continue encouraging the Chinese to address domestic distortions and overcapacity, notably in the steel sector.

TTIP

Malmstrom said conclusion by the end of the Obama Administration would require us to address all but the most sensitive “endgame” issues before the summer. Progress had been better in some areas than others. The Commissioner referred to a possible “stock-take” before the summer. It was within the context of tough negotiations on procurement with the US and others that the Commission had revised its proposal for an International Procurement Instrument (IPI) which would be considered by future Trade FACs.

All member states spoke in favour of an ambitious and balanced agreement. I said the US seemed genuine about wanting a deal this year and that we should seize the opportunity lest it disappear for some time.

The WTO Agenda

The Commissioner said that the outcome of Nairobi had surpassed expectations, demonstrating that the WTO could still deliver. Discussions in Davos had confirmed this view. It was in the EU’s interest to try to reinforce the multilateral agenda but there was a need for debate on which issues to pursue and how. The Commissioner mentioned digital trade and e-commerce, investment and competition as possibilities, preferably for multilateral negotiations; open plurilaterals were the next best option. Member states broadly welcomed the Commissioner’s assessment.

Member states also underlined the importance of WTO members ratifying and implementing of the agreement on trade facilitation, agreed at the Bali Ministerial in 2013. Around a further 40 ratifications are needed for the new agreement to enter into force.

Pre-Competitiveness Council

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Baroness Neville-Rolfe) has today made the following statement.

The Competitiveness Council is taking place in Brussels on Monday 29 February. The Council will discuss matters relating to the internal market and industry. There will be no discussion of research, innovation or space. I will be representing the UK.

There are no legislative items on the agenda for this Council.

The first item will be a “competitiveness check-up” during which the Commission will give a presentation on the state of play of the real economy, focusing on start-ups, scale-ups and SMEs.

The next item is a policy debate on the circular economy package. This issue will be discussed in parallel by the Environment Council on 4 March.

We then expect to receive a presentation by both the Commission and the presidency of the Council of the EU (“the presidency”) on the steel industry before an exchange of view among member states. This item follows from the stakeholder conference on energy intensive industries which was held on 15 February and itself was an action arising from the extraordinary Competitiveness Council on steel in November 2015 last year. Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, the right hon. Anna Soubry, represented the UK at the conference and sought faster action by the Commission to deal with unfair trade practices. Single Market and Industry Commissioner Elżbieta Bienkowska underlined that the Commission did not tolerate practices such as dumping and would continue to use trade defence instruments where necessary.

The next item on the agenda is presentation by the presidency on the European semester and the implementation of country specific recommendations to tackle barriers to growth. The discussion is likely to focus on how recommendations can help support the competitiveness agenda.

The final substantive item on the agenda is a policy debate and adoption of the Council conclusions on the single market strategy for services and goods.

There are four any other business items on the agenda: information from the presidency on the state of play of the unitary patent and unified patent court; information from the presidency on patents and plant breeders rights; information from the Commission on the current state of play of the renewed framework for transatlantic transfers of personal data (EU-US privacy shield) and an update from the Commission on the current legislative proposal of cross-border portability.

Our objectives for the Competitiveness Council are to:

Ensure that it gives a strong steer to the Commission that rapid and ambitious implementation of the single market strategy is a priority; and build on the discussions regarding the steel sector held at the extraordinary Competitiveness Council (November 2015) and stakeholder conference on energy intensive industries.

DEFENCE

Multinational Peacekeeping: Egypt

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): The UK will deploy a squadron of Royal Engineers to provide short-term engineering support to the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), a non-UN multinational
peacekeeping organisation in Egypt. The MFO was created by an agreement between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the State of Israel to monitor the terms of the 1979 Treaty of the Peace and continues to make an important contribution to peace and stability in the region. The deployment begins in March 2016 and will involve approximately 100 personnel from the Corps of the Royal Engineers carrying out a range of infrastructure improvement works at the MFO main operating base in Sinai for up to 12 weeks.

The UK has a long history of supporting the MFO, and currently provides the MFO with an Engineer Officer of the rank of Major to serve on the Force Commander’s Staff.

In the Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015, the Government strengthened the UK’s commitment to international peacekeeping. This deployment further underlines our support to regional peace and security.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs and General Affairs Councils

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 15 February and I attended the General Affairs Council on 16 February. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and the General Affairs Council was chaired by the Dutch presidency. The meetings were held in Brussels.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at:


In her introductory remarks Ms Mogherini welcomed the application from Bosnia for its application for EU membership and urged Bosnia to maintain the pace of reforms. On Libya, Ms Mogherini welcomed as a positive development the presidency Council’s revised list of Cabinet Ministers. Ms Mogherini also updated the Council on the recent meeting in Munich of the middle east peace process quartet. She also welcomed the launch of NATO’s maritime operation in the Aegean.

Climate Diplomacy

The Council underlined the importance of European climate diplomacy in encouraging implementation of the global agreement on climate change reached in Paris in December 2015. It set out the parameters for a 2016 climate diplomacy action plan, prioritising implementation of the Paris agreement and addressing the causes of climate change.

Moldova

The Council discussed the situation in Moldova and adopted Council conclusions on the reforms Moldova needed to carry out in line with its association agreement.

In discussion Ms Mogherini emphasised the need for the EU to refrain from taking sides or intervening directly in Moldova’s internal affairs.

Syria

The Council discussed the political, security and humanitarian situation in Syria. Ministers were briefed on the outcome of the Syria donors conference held in London on 4 February, and the international Syria support group (ISSG) meeting in Munich on 11 February. The Foreign Secretary made clear in an early intervention that Russia had the power to end the violence and bring the Syrian regime to the negotiating table. He warned that the situation in Aleppo risked creating a massive humanitarian crisis and a new wave of migration. He highlighted the importance of implementing the outcomes of the London conference, and praised the commission and member states for their generosity. The financial pledges and commitments to provide education and jobs to Syrian refugees was vital.

Lunch with the Lebanese Foreign Minister

Over lunch, Ministers exchanged views with the Lebanese Foreign Minister, Gebran Bassil, on the situation in Lebanon and the region, including the refugee and migration situation. The Foreign Secretary emphasised the need to focus both on humanitarian and development support. Member states expressed support to Lebanon, in particular for hosting over 1.1 million refugees, and to the Lebanese armed forces for maintaining stability. Member states also urged Lebanon to break the political deadlock in regard to the presidential vacuum.

Belarus

Council conclusions were adopted on Belarus. In conclusion Ms Mogherini said EU-Belarus relations had for many years been trapped in a cycle of hope, disappointment, sanctions and difficult engagement. However, trends had been more positive over the last few years, including on Ukraine and important, albeit limited, steps on human rights and democracy. The Council reached a political decision not to extend restrictive measures for 170 individuals and three companies whose listings are currently suspended. However, it left in place the arms embargo and restrictive measures for four individuals involved in unresolved disappearances.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

- The Council adopted conclusions on climate diplomacy.
- The Council adopted conclusions on EU priorities at UN Human Rights Fora in 2016.
- The Council adopted conclusions on Burundi.
- The Council adopted conclusions on Somalia.
- The Council approved the EU’s position regarding the agenda set for the 14th meeting of the EU-Kyrgyz Republic Co-operation Council.
- The Council prolonged EU restrictive measures against two persons and one entity in Zimbabwe until 20 February 2017, while removing the names of 78 persons and eight entities from the list of those targeted by the measures.
- The Council set a financial reference amount of €825,000 to cover the expenditure related to the mandate of the EU Special Representative for Human Rights from 1 March to 28 February 2017.
- The Council extended the mandate of the civilian EU integrated border management assistance mission in Libya by six months, until 21 August 2016.
The Council adopted the draft European Union programme of exercises and exercise-related activities under the CFSP 2016-20.

GENERAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at:


The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 16 February 2016 focused on follow up to European Council conclusions, preparation of the February and March European Councils and the inter-institutional agreement on better regulation.

EUROPEAN COUNCIL FOLLOW UP AND PREPARATION OF THE FEBRUARY EUROPEAN COUNCIL

The GAC prepared the agenda for the European Council on 18-19 February, which the Prime Minister attended. The agenda included the UK’s EU renegotiation, migration and eurozone recommendations as part of the European semester process. I emphasised that more work needed to be done before the February European Council on both renegotiation and migration. On migration, I called for a more strategic approach and a focus on full implementation. I also highlighted the contribution made by the London conference on Syria and called for pledges made at the conference to be honoured.

Preparation of the March European Council

The GAC also briefly prepared the agenda for the European Council on 17-18 March, which the Prime Minister will attend. The agenda will again cover migration and the European semester. The Council noted that discussion would also flow from outcomes of the February Council.

Inter-Institutional Agreement on Better Regulation (IIA)

The presidency updated the GAC on the ongoing IIA negotiations, with a view to a more detailed discussion at the March GAC.

Under any other business, Bulgaria updated the GAC on the recent blockades by Greek farmers at border checkpoints on its border with Greece.

HOME DEPARTMENT

State of Policing: England and Wales

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Yesterday, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Constabulary laid before Parliament his annual assessment of policing in England and Wales in accordance with Section 54 of the Police Act 1996. Copies are available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic and in the Vote Office.

Today, HMIC has updated its website with the judgments and informing the public about performance across a broad range of policing activities. The information is available at: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic.

I am very pleased to see that more than half of forces have been judged as “good” or “outstanding” across all three key areas. Those forces that have received an “outstanding” judgment should be congratulated for the service they provide to the communities they serve.

I am, however, disappointed to see that so many forces are judged to “require improvement” for at least one of the key areas. Police and Crime Commissioners must hold Chief Constables to account for delivering high quality policing that meets the needs of communities. Those communities will expect action to address the areas for improvement identified by the inspectorate and will, I am sure, be looking for strong improvement over the coming year.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Turks and Caicos Islands

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Mr Desmond Swayne): I wish to bring the House up to date with respect to the loan guarantee from the Department for International Development (DFID) to the Turks and Caicos Islands Government (TCIG).

On 28 February 2011, my right hon. Friend, the then Minister of State for International Development (Alan Duncan) informed the House that DFID had finalised a guarantee in favour of Scotiabank (Turks and Caicos) Ltd to provide TCIG with access to a maximum capital amount of US$260 million over five years. He argued that the assistance would allow TCIG to implement budget measures which would lead to achieving a fiscal surplus in the financial year ending March 2013.

I am pleased to announce that on 22 February TCIG repaid its remaining borrowing under this guarantee on schedule and with an outstanding borrowing need of just US$28 million. It was able to raise this amount without further recourse to the UK Government for support and is expected to repay that loan over the next three-and-a-half years.

TCIG has progressed from deficits of US$77 million in financial year 2010-11 and US$29 million in 2011-12 to a surplus the following year and strong surpluses thereafter. TCIG and the TCI public service had to make a number of difficult decisions and sacrifices. Essential investment was maintained, including an expansion of the international airport that has allowed a significant increase in flights from US cities. The successful conclusion of DFID’s guarantee is a credit to the resolve of the TCI public service, TCIG, the Governor’s Office and UK-financed technical experts.

JUSTICE

Offender Management

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): I would like to provide the House with an update on the progress of our electronic monitoring
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Civil Justice, Lord Faulks QC, has made the following written statement.

I have today laid the draft Third Parties (Rights against Insurers) Regulations (“the draft Regulations”) before both Houses of Parliament. The draft regulations have to be approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament before they can be made. Subject to that approval being given, I intend to make the regulations without delay. I will announce the commencement date of the Third Parties (Rights against Insurers) Act 2010 (“the 2010 Act”) as amended by both the Insurance Act 2015 and the regulations in due course but the date will not be earlier than three months after the regulations have been made.

[HCWS556]
Written Statements

Monday 29 February 2016

CABINET OFFICE

“Better use of Data in Government”

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): Today I have announced the launch of the consultation paper “Better use of data,” which sets out proposals to improve the way in which Government makes use of data on behalf of citizens.

I have placed a copy in the Library of the House.

The paper recognises the enormous potential that better use of data can have in improving the lives of citizens, our economy and society. Proportionate and secure sharing of information between public authorities can improve the lives of citizens, support decisions on the economy which allow our businesses to flourish, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector.

We have developed these proposals over two years including significant collaboration with civil society groups, who have participated, challenged and improved our thinking over that time. Now we are seeking to take the proposals forward for further consultation.


[HCWS558]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

European Union

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): During the debate on the European Union Referendum Bill in the House of Lords, my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Baroness Anelay of St Johns, said that the Government would, in due course, provide information about the application of Article 50 of the Treaty of the European Union (Official Report, col 475, 23 November 2015). To fulfil this commitment my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs has today laid in both Houses copies of a Command Paper The process for withdrawing from the European Union (Cm 9216).

This paper is also available on the www.gov.uk website. [HCWS557]
Written Statements
Tuesday 1 March 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Higher Education Student Support

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): Today I am announcing that the Government are increasing the residency requirement for EU nationals before they can access higher education student living cost support.

In England, EU nationals and their families are able to apply for a tuition fee loan and be charged the “home” rate of fees to attend higher education. This mirrors provisions available to UK students wishing to study abroad in other EU countries. To access student finance, EU nationals need to have been resident in the European Economic Area or Switzerland for the three years prior to the first day of the first academic year. EU nationals who have been resident in the UK, Channel Islands and Isle of Man for three years can also apply for support for their living costs.

The higher education student support budget is under pressure from increasing numbers of applicants from the EU and the Government are taking steps to manage the burden on the taxpayer.

The Government are therefore increasing the residency requirement that EU nationals must meet in order to be eligible for living cost support. EU nationals that start their courses in the 2016-17 academic year onwards will be required to demonstrate five years’ residency in the UK, Channel Islands and Isle of Man. This change will come into effect for applications submitted to the Student Loans Company after the amending regulations have come into force later this month. Students who are already studying will not be affected by these changes.

This change will bring us more into line with the rules set by other EU countries including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden who generally require five years’ residency in the home country before students become eligible for living cost support. The recently published student loan repayment strategy will help to ensure all borrowers repay what is due.

The increased residency requirement will not apply to UK nationals to whom the existing three year residency rule will continue to apply. EEA migrant workers and their family members are also not affected by this change.

I am grateful to those who responded to the consultation, and whose comments helped us carefully consider the implications of our proposals.

[HCWS559]

CABINET OFFICE

Contingencies Fund

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (John Penrose): The Cabinet Office wishes to report that a cash advance from the Contingencies Fund has been sought for the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (referred to as the “Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration” in the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration Act 1967 and the “Health Service Commissioner” in the Health Services Commissioners Act 1993).

The advance has been sought to meet a cash requirement resulting from planned expenditure set out in supplementary estimates. As authority for the cash will not be granted until March with the passage of the Supply and Appropriation Act, and the ombudsman has to settle some bills before then, a Contingencies Fund advance has been requested.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £801,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £801,000 will be met by repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS564]

Open and Transparent Government

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Matthew Hancock): This Government are committed to making Government more transparent, so taxpayers can hold the state to account both on how their money is being spent and how decisions are made which affect their lives.

The Freedom of Information Act is one of the pillars on which open Government operates. We are committed to supporting the Act. Yet after more than a decade in operation, it is appropriate to review, in the whole, how it has operated in practice, and establish how its mechanisms could be improved.

Consequently, in July 2015, we established an independent, cross-party Commission on Freedom of Information. The Commission has now submitted its report. Given the keen public and media interest in the report, we are promptly publishing it alongside our preliminary views on its recommendations.

We are very grateful to the Commission for its thorough and thoughtful work in this significant and complex area. The Commission’s review has attracted considerable interest and should be commended for an even-handed approach to gathering evidence from across a very broad spectrum. This approach is reflected in the balanced set of measures put forward in the report.

The Commission makes 21 specific recommendations. It notes that while some of its recommendations require legislation, other improvements can be made without legislative change. The Government’s views on some of the most salient recommendations are as follows:

Charging for freedom of information requests:

The Government agree with the Commission’s view that it is not appropriate to introduce fees for requests, over and above the existing narrow circumstances in which a requestor can be currently charged for disbursement costs. We appreciate that some public authorities are concerned by the burdens imposed on them by the Act and the associated costs. However, the introduction of new fees would lead to a reduction in the ability of requesters, especially the media, to make use of the Act. We believe that transparency can help save taxpayers’ money, by driving out waste and inefficiency.
The Cabinet veto:

The Commission recommends the introduction of a narrower and more limited veto provision. The Government agree with the Commission’s analysis that Parliament intended the executive to be able to have the final say as to whether information should be released under the Act. In line with the Commission’s thinking, the Government will in future only deploy the veto after an Information Commissioner decision. On the basis that this approach proves effective, we will not bring forward legislation at this stage.

Updating practice guidance:

The Government agree with the Commission’s recommendations to review the operation of Section 45 of the Act to ensure that the range of issues on which guidance can be offered to public authorities under the code of practice is sufficient and up to date. Public authorities should have sufficient guidance and advice properly to manage information access requests and to continue the Government’s mandate of being the most transparent Government in the world. This does not require legislation.

Publication of freedom of information statistics:

The Cabinet Office already publishes detailed statistics on a quarterly and annual basis on the operation of the Act within central Government. It is important that other public authorities should be similarly transparent. We know that many other organisations already publish such data, but this does not happen consistently. The publication of such data not only provides accountability to the public, but allows the Information Commissioner to identify and target poorly performing public authorities more effectively. We will therefore issue guidance in the revised section 45 code of practice to set a standard that public authorities with 100 full-time equivalent employees or more should publish such information.

Public interest and risk assessments:

Noting that the Commission did not provide a formal recommendation regarding risk assessments, the Government agree with the Commission’s analysis that considering the public interest remains the best way to assess whether specific risk assessments should be released. This will allow the important balance between providing robust protection for sensitive information and transparency to be maintained.

Handling vexatious requests:

The Commission’s recognises the difficulty that genuinely “vexatious” requests can place on public authorities. We agree with the recommendation of improved guidance, via a revised code of practice, to allow public authorities to use section 14(1) in the rare cases where it is necessary and appropriate. The exercise by citizens of legal rights also brings with it responsibilities—and access to information rights should not be abused to cause distress or a means of harassment. Equally, the “vexatious” designation is not an excuse to save public officials’ embarrassment from poor decisions or inappropriate spending of taxpayers’ money. This will not require legislation.

Greater transparency on pay and perks of senior staff:

The Commission recognises the advances that have been made to increase transparency about senior executives’ pay and benefits. Further steps will be taken to ensure this transparency is delivered across the whole public sector. The default position should be that such information from all public bodies is published; that the public should not have to resort to making freedom of information requests to obtain it, and data protection rules should not be used as an excuse to hide the taxpayer-funded payments to such senior public sector executives. We will now consider what additional steps should be taken to address any gaps in published information, and in particular in relation to expenses and benefits in kind as recommended, including more broadly than at present.

The Government will carefully consider the Commission’s other recommendations.

The Government have already demonstrated our commitment to openness through the publication of around 23,000 datasets on https://www.data.gov.uk. We are proud of the recognition we have received as the world’s leading country on open data through the World Wide Web Foundation’s open data barometer. Our next Open Government Partnership national action plan, to be published later this year, will set stretching new commitments to take UK transparency further.

A copy of the Commission’s report is being placed in the Libraries of both Houses, and will be published online on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS566]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

BBC: Governance and Regulation

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
(Mr John Whittingdale): On 16 September 2015, as part of the charter review process, I announced an independent review into the governance and regulation of the BBC.

I am pleased today to announce the publication of the report for the review of the governance and regulation of the BBC. This review has been independently led on behalf of the Government by Sir David Clementi, to whom I would like to record my thanks for his excellent work in considering this important issue.

The review is now completed and has been laid before the House today. A copy of the report has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The review is also available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-review-of-the-governance-and-regulation-of-the-bbc

On 16 July 2015, as part of the charter review process, I also announced a consultation on the future of the BBC. The consultation ran from 16 July 2015 to 8 October 2015 and received 192,564 responses.

I am pleased to announce today the publication of the report summarising these consultation responses and I confirm that this report will be laid before the House today. A copy of the report will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.


Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-03-01/HCWS567/.

[HCWS567]
EDUCATION

GCSE/A-levels

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): We are reforming GCSEs, AS and A-levels to make sure that they provide students with the best possible preparation for further and higher education, and for employment. We want new GCSEs to set expectations which match those of the best education systems in the world, with rigorous assessment that provides a reliable measure of students’ achievement. The reforms are extensive and represent a new qualification gold standard.

Schools are now teaching some of the new reformed GCSEs and A-levels, and we have already published reformed subject content for those GCSEs and A-levels to be taught from September 2016. Content for reformed GCSE subjects and for AS and A-level subjects can be found on gov.uk.

The new GCSEs will be more academically demanding and reformed AS and A-levels will better prepare students for undergraduate study.

Today I am publishing revised subject content for the final group of GCSEs and AS and A-levels that will be taught in schools from September 2017:

- physical education short course GCSE,
- GCSE sociology, and
- AS and A-levels in geology, politics and statistics.

The physical education GCSE short course represents half the content of the revised PE GCSE that was published in January 2015. Like the full course, demand has increased with a greater emphasis on theory and use of data. Students will also have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate practical skills and will be assessed in one team and one individual sport/activity.

The more demanding sociology GCSE requires students to develop an understanding of the classical theorists and how their ideas have contributed to the development of current sociological orthodoxies. They will compare and contrast competing theoretical approaches to explain society, drawing connections between the different topic areas, and students will now be required to read and respond to extracts from classic and contemporary sociological texts.

Geology AS and A-level content requires students to take a more quantitative and mathematical approach to the study of geology. New content includes the study of geochemistry, the role of fluids in geology, engineering geology and geohazard risk analysis. Fieldwork remains a key part of the subject, and students will carry out relevant and meaningful fieldwork activities that will be assessed across a full range of practical competencies, developed with HE stakeholders, in order to prepare them for further geological study.

The final content for politics AS and A-level requires all students to understand a fourth political idea, in addition to their study of conservatism, liberalism and socialism. Students will choose from feminism, multiculturalism, anarchism, nationalism or ecologism, and know and understand the core principles and features of these ideas. As part of this they will study the work of a diverse list of political thinkers who have contributed to each idea. Following consultation, we have revised the list of political theorists to make sure that female thinkers are appropriately represented. At A-level, students will choose between a comparative study of USA and UK politics and Government, which now includes understanding different approaches to comparative politics, or a study of global politics.

The reformed statistics AS and A-level requires students to study the statistical enquiry cycle and to perform key statistical calculations such as Bayes’ theorem and one and two sample non-parametric tests. Students will be required to know and use fundamental formulae, for example to determine the Poisson probability formula and analysis of variance. New content has been added, such as choosing the appropriate hypothesis test to carry out in particular circumstances and calculating the risk of a type II error.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Security of Supply and the Capacity Market

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd): I wish to set out the Government’s intention for reforms to the way we secure electricity capacity for future years, to ensure a secure, affordable supply in the short and longer terms. In laying this statement before Parliament, I am also setting out the Government’s policy intent to make changes to our policy on the capacity market and the corresponding Electricity Capacity Regulations 2014 and the Capacity Market (Amendment) Rules 2014.

Security of supply—the context

Delivering energy security is the number one priority for DECC. Maintaining the secure electricity supplies that hard-working families and businesses across the country can rely on is our key objective. We face a legacy of years of underinvestment which has left us more open to the risk of any quickening in the pace of plant closures. To address this we need to start building new capacity now, especially gas, to guarantee our energy security in the 2020s.

At the same time, the huge movement in global commodities prices during 2015 has lowered consumers’ energy costs but has made generating power unprofitable for most non-renewable plant. Thermal generators are experiencing lower utilisation levels as a result of increasing renewable capacity and coal plant, in particular, are facing large losses. In consequence, we have seen several closures announced and other plant may be at risk. We therefore need decisive action now to ensure energy security.

Our principal existing security of supply tool is the capacity market (CM). Two CM auctions have now been held, for delivery in 2018-19 and 2019-20 respectively. While, given the target levels that were set, the auctions procured relatively little new capacity, both auctions went smoothly and secured capacity at very low prices for consumers.

Capacity market review

As a result we have been reviewing the CM mechanism to ensure it remains fit for the purpose of bringing forward the new capacity we need, particularly gas plant, as older plant such as coal come off the system.
The clear message from industry and investors that we have heard as part of the review is that the mechanism retains their confidence; is the best available approach to our long-term security of supply; and that regulatory stability is of crucial importance. At the same time, we have heard clear concerns that we must do more to protect against delivery risks; that we need to tighten the incentives on those with agreements to honour those agreements; and ensure that the full range of delivery risks are accounted for in our procurement decisions; and that we must avoid the risk of under-buying, or buying too late—which would mean that new plant had insufficient incentive to come forward. The overarching message has been that the volume of capacity procured needs to rise and the clearing price needs to increase as a result in order to provide the appropriate incentives for the market to bring forward new gas capacity.

We have reflected on these messages, and agree with them. We are therefore now proposing a plan of reform for the CM in three important respects:

Buying more capacity, and buying it earlier. We will expect the next CM “T-4” auction in December 2016 to buy materially more capacity than might otherwise have been the case;

Tightening delivery incentives on those who have agreements to deliver against them and to penalise those who renege more severely;

Tackling how wholesale prices impact in the short term on energy security, holding a new auction to bring forward the first CM delivery year to 2017-18. We propose to hold a new one-year ahead auction this coming winter for delivery in winter 2017-18.

Buying more capacity, and buying it earlier

We need to buy more capacity, and buy it earlier, in order to manage the increased risks we face in the next decade as we transition away from coal and as older plant close. The precise target for the next (December 2016) four-year ahead CM auction will not be set until summer, once Government have had the chance to review detailed recommendations from National Grid. But we have been discussing with them, and with our own panel of technical experts (PTE), the range of factors which it is appropriate to take into account. It is clear from these discussions that the incorporation of a new sensitivity to reflect these increased non-delivery risks will be recommended. We would expect this as a minimum to lead to an increase in the target volume of around 1GW, and we will be seeking expert advice on whether it should be higher. We will also consider whether it is appropriate to cover for a more extreme cold winter scenario.

We are also likely to bring forward much of the target procurement to the four-year ahead auction, that we might otherwise leave until one year ahead. In previous auctions we have set aside 2.5GW for purchase at the one-year ahead “T-1” stage, but purchasing more of our estimated requirement earlier should help new plant such as gas participate to meet those requirements.

Of course, the precise target will be set in the light of all the evidence available at the time, including crucially an updated value for money analysis. There could for example be trade-offs in purchasing capacity early, which may hedge against risk and allow new resources to compete, but which brings with it some risk of over-procurement if demand subsequently shifts. Nonetheless, taken together, we would expect the next auction to purchase significantly more capacity—perhaps over 3GW more—than would otherwise have been the case. And, of course, if it becomes clear that plant which already have capacity agreements for the 2020-21 delivery year will fail to make good on their agreements, then we would expect to re-buy that capacity too from other sources.

We are confident that a healthy pipeline of robust baseload and peaking gas projects stands ready to take advantage of the opportunities we are creating, and that the revised CM will deliver the new plant we need. Consultation suggests that, provided the CM is reformed in the way described, there are few if any other barriers to these projects coming through to fruition—but the Government will continue discussions with developers and investors to ensure that no unnecessary barriers exist to bringing forward an appropriate mix of plant.

Tightening delivery incentives

It is crucial for our security of supply that, when companies take on an obligation to deliver, they then make good on that commitment. If they do not, it creates shortfalls in capacity that need to be filled, putting our security of supply unacceptably at risk. It is also potentially unfair to other bidders who would have been able to secure agreements. For this reason we need a robust system of checks both on new build projects, to ensure that they are on track to deliver by the delivery year, and on existing plant to ensure that they honour their agreements. At the same time, it is important that our requirements and sanctions regime are not so punitive that legitimate projects are dissuaded from participating in the first place.

We consulted in October on a range of potential new requirements to tighten the assurance regime around new build projects. In the light of responses, we are now implementing a number of these proposals—including a ban on failed projects from participating in future auctions, increased monitoring and reporting milestones, and potential increases in credit cover for projects who cannot demonstrate sufficient progress by the 11-month stage. Taken together, and on top of the existing requirements, these should materially increase the incentives on projects to have robust delivery plans in place from an early date and, if they are to fail, encourage them to fail early, allowing more time for National Grid to seek alternative sources of supply.

However, we also heard evidence that one of our original proposals, for a system of pre-auction finance tests linked to auction bids, could act as a barrier to entry for robust independent projects. We take these concerns seriously, and are therefore not proposing to implement these proposals now as they stand. Instead, we are now inviting views on an alternative suggestion, that credit cover for all new projects should be increased at the pre-auction stage.

At the same time, we are taking the opportunity to consult on higher termination fees for existing plant who renege on agreements, to ensure that they fulfil their commitments.

Holding a new auction to bring forward the first CM delivery year to 2017-18

The reforms outlined above will mean that the CM can guarantee our security of supply now and in the future. But we also need to take decisive action in the shorter term.
National Grid has a firm plan in place to take the actions needed to maintain our margins this coming winter and the Contingency Balancing Reserve (CBR) supports them in balancing the system in light of tightening margins. But the price of securing reserves of this sort has been increasing in recent years; and it has always been recognised that a reserve, if allowed to grow too large, can cause distortion in the market.

We therefore propose to bring forward the start of the CM delivery period by a year, by holding an auction this coming winter (likely to be in January 2017) for delivery one year ahead, in winter 2017-18. This auction would purchase 100% of CM requirement for that year—in other words, while its structure and timings will be similar to the T-1 auction, it will procure our full capacity requirement, not just a top-up. This will provide assurance for the 2017-18 year and enable the CBR to be closed for that year as it is replaced by the CM. Ofgem have said that they expect the need for the CBR to disappear once the CM is in place.

This Government have promised to remove distortion and interventions from the market. We recognise that although the CBR has safeguarded our energy security, it increasingly risks doing so at the cost of distorting investment and plant closure decisions. By introducing the CM early, we allow the market to operate better earlier with less price volatility and uncertainty—a more efficient way of delivering energy security.

Diesel

Finally, we have heard a number of complaints that diesel engines have unfair advantages in the CM due to how they are treated in the main energy market. We think there may be merit in these concerns, and reasons why it could be hoped, but also expected, that diesel will play a smaller role in future.

There are concerns over the potential impact on local air quality. The CM is technology neutral, and as such any type of technology is allowed to participate provided it is otherwise in compliance with relevant legislation—so it would not be appropriate to set specific emission limits within the CM eligibility criteria. However, Government are not complacent, and plan to take swift and appropriate action to avoid any disproportionate impact on air quality from diesel engines via new environmental legislation introducing appropriate emission limit values for air pollutants for new generators, where these could significantly contribute to harmful levels of air pollutants and the exceeding of air quality limit values.

DEFRA will consult later this year on options which will include legislation that would set binding emission limit values on relevant air pollutants from diesel engines, with a view to having legislation in force no later than January 2019, and possibly sooner. These limits would apply to generators or groups of generators with a rated thermal input equal to or greater than 1 MW and less than 50 MW\(^3\) irrespective of their number of hours of operation during any given year.

Small distribution-connected generators are receiving increasing revenues from “embedded benefits” which include avoided transmission network charges. Some of this is justified because they offer system benefits such as avoided network reinforcement costs. However Ofgem has previously expressed concerns that these arrangements are not fully cost reflective; and hence “embedded benefits” may over-reward distribution-connected generators such as diesel reciprocating engines. Moreover, the proportion of generation connected at distribution level is increasing and so is the impact of flows from the distribution network on the transmission network.

Ofgem is therefore concerned that these charging arrangements could be having an increasing impact on the system, including distorting investment decisions and leading to inefficient outcomes in the CM. Ofgem is therefore reviewing whether it would be in consumers’ interests to change the charging arrangements for distribution-connected generators. Ofgem will set out their conclusions and a proposed way forward on this matter, potentially including initiating changes to the charging regime, in the summer. Ofgem will need to consider carefully how and when any changes should be implemented, including whether any transitional arrangements are required, and will aim to provide clarity on their direction of travel before prequalification for the next CM auction.

Consultation

Implementation of the policy positions outlined above requires a variety of regulatory and non-regulatory action:

Some changes we are now making to our delivery assurance regime reflect the outcome of a recent consultation. The consultation also discussed a number of other incremental improvements and simplifications to the CM design. I am publishing today the Government’s full position on the outcome of that consultation exercise.

Some further changes to the delivery assurance regime and other areas and, crucially, the ability to hold the proposed additional auction for delivery in 2017-18, are discussed in a separate formal public consultation document I am publishing today.

Changes to auction parameters, including the amount to procure, do not require new regulations. Instead they will be determined as usual by the Secretary of State, in the light of expert advice, in summer, before prequalification starts for the next auction. Specific proposals for the parameters (e.g. precise volume targets) are therefore not discussed in the documents I am publishing today, but the intention to purchase more capacity, and earlier, in that auction forms an important context when considering what I am announcing today as a whole.

\(^{1}\)The existing industrial emissions directive applies to 50MW+ generation.

[HCWS560]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

National Wildlife Crime Unit

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): The national wildlife crime unit is a specialist unit dedicated to tackling wildlife crime, playing an important role in wildlife law enforcement both at home and internationally. It provides intelligence and direct assistance to individual police forces and other UK law enforcement agencies, including providing specialist support that allows warranted officers to investigate wildlife crime. The unit also acts as the UK policing focal point for EUROPOL and INTERPOL activity on all wildlife crime related matters, and works in partnership with non-governmental agencies across the UK committed to tackling wildlife crime.
Following the spending review 2015, DEFRA and Home Office Ministers have been considering the level of Government funding for the national wildlife crime unit beyond March 2016.

In recognition of the important contribution the unit makes to tackling wildlife crime, both at home and abroad, I can confirm that DEFRA and Home Office Ministers have agreed that their respective Departments will each provide the unit with funding of £136,000 a year for the next four financial years. This will give the unit significant financial stability and enable its vital work to continue until at least 2020. Those contributions will be in addition to the funding central Government provides to police forces in England and Wales to tackle all types of crime—including wildlife crime.

In addition, DEFRA will provide the unit with up to £29,000 a year over the next four years for specific work to tackle wildlife crime conducted online, as a developing area of global criminal activity.

Government funding for the national wildlife crime unit jointly provided by DEFRA and the Home Office up to March 2020, including additional support from DEFRA to tackle online wildlife crime, will total £1.204 million.

[HCWS561]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Investigatory Powers Bill

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): I have today introduced the Investigatory Powers Bill. This important piece of legislation will provide a new framework to govern the use and oversight of investigatory powers by law enforcement and the security and intelligence agencies. The enhanced privacy safeguards, which are at the heart of the Bill, protect not only sensitive professions but the public at large.

The Investigatory Powers Bill will transform the law relating to the use and oversight of these powers. It will strengthen safeguards and introduce world-leading oversight arrangements. The Bill does three things:

First, it brings together all of the powers already available to law enforcement and the security and intelligence agencies to obtain communications data and communications. It will make these powers—and the safeguards that apply to them—clear and understandable.

Secondly, the Bill radically overhauls the way these powers are authorised and overseen. It introduces a “double-lock” for interception warrants, so that, following Secretary of State authorisation, these—and other warrants—cannot come into force until they have been approved by a judge. And it creates a powerful new investigatory powers commissioner (IPC) to oversee how these powers are used.

Thirdly, it ensures powers are fit for the digital age. The Bill makes provision for the retention of internet connection records (ICRs) in order for law enforcement to identify the communications service to which a device has connected. This will restore capabilities that have been lost as a result of inappropriate use of powers.

In November 2015 the Government published a draft Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny. The provisions in the draft Bill were considered by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament and by a Joint Committee of both Houses of Parliament convened to scrutinise the draft Bill.

The Government are grateful to the three Committees for their thorough and comprehensive scrutiny of this Bill. Their efforts have assisted us in enhancing safeguards and refining technical aspects. The revised Bill we are introducing today is both clearer and stronger in protecting privacy.

Between them, those Committees received a significant body of written evidence and heard from Government, industry, civil liberties groups and many others. The revised Bill, along with the further explanatory material that we are publishing, reflects the majority of the recommendations made by the three Committees. I am publishing a Command Paper alongside this Bill which sets out the Government’s response to the three Committees and provides a guide to the Bill, setting out clearly how the draft Bill responds to their recommendations.

We have taken significant steps to address the common themes across the three reports. In particular:

We have responded to the Committees’ call for greater clarity by producing a much clearer Bill. We have refined technical definitions and are publishing additional material alongside the Bill to explain how the powers in the Bill will be used and why they are needed.

The privacy safeguards are stronger and clearer. The Bill incorporates additional protections for journalists, removing a key exemption for the security and intelligence agencies when seeking to identify journalists’ sources. And it incorporates statutory protections for lawyers.

In response to recommendations from the Joint Committee and the Science and Technology Committee, we will continue to work closely with industry to develop implementation plans for retaining internet connection records.

In response to the Committees’ detailed recommendations, the Bill incorporates significant changes, including:

- Strengthening the office and powers of the investigatory powers commissioner, giving the Lord Chief Justice a role in his or her appointment, making it harder to remove him or her from office, providing statutory powers for direct access to the agencies’ IT systems, and allowing for the commissioner to inform people who have suffered as a result of the inappropriate use of powers.
- Introducing new safeguards for interception warrants, reducing the period of time within which a judicial commissioner must approve urgent interception—and equipment interference—warrants and putting in place new statutory safeguards to prevent agencies asking overseas partners to undertake interception in the absence of a warrant.
- Clarifying the provisions in the Bill relating to the obligations that may be placed on communication service providers, including amendments to the Bill to put beyond doubt that...
companies can only be asked to remove encryption that they themselves have applied—or has been applied on their behalf by a third party—and that they will not be asked to remove encryption where it is not practicable for them to do so. The accompanying codes of practice also make clear that a warrant can only be served on a person who is capable of providing the assistance required by the warrant, and that the duty to comply with the warrant can only be enforced against a person who is capable of complying with it.

Where we have not been able to accept the Committees’ recommendations, our response to the Committees explains the good reasons for not accepting them. In particular:

We will continue to use “economic well-being”, where it is linked to national security, as a purpose for which some of these powers can be used. That is in line with the statutory purposes of the intelligence agencies and relevant European directives.

We also preserve bulk equipment interference warrants. This is a key operational requirement for GCHQ. We have published a public case for the use of bulk powers which sets out why this power remains necessary.

To assist Parliament in scrutinising the Bill, and at the recommendation of the Joint Committee, the Government are publishing today drafts of six statutory codes of practice that will be made under the Bill. These address many of the Committees’ recommendations by providing details of how the powers and obligations will work in practice. The codes will be approved by Parliament and will have statutory force.

The Government have also heeded comments that we must go further in making the case for the bulk powers provided for in the Bill. I firmly believe bulk powers are a vital part of this Bill. As those who wish to do us harm grow ever more sophisticated in circumventing the reach of law enforcement and the security and intelligence agencies, we must provide them with the powers they need to keep up and keep us safe. The bulk powers in this Bill provide essential capabilities needed to detect threats to the UK and its interests. But it is right that Parliament has a chance to debate these powers and that the public understands what the law permits with regards to their personal data.

In response to the recommendation of the Joint Committee, the Government are publishing alongside the Bill an operational case for bulk powers. This sets out in more detail than ever before why the agencies need these powers, examples of how they are used, and the safeguards that will govern their use under the Bill. We have also updated the published case for internet connection records to reflect that we are accepting the Joint Committee’s recommendation that, where necessary and proportionate, the purposes for which law enforcement may seek to access ICR should be expanded to include information about websites accessed beyond those related to communications services and illegal material.

The Joint Committee recommended that the Bill should provide that a specially constituted joint committee of the two Houses should conduct a post-legislative review of the legislation after five years’ operation. It is not possible to bind Parliament in statute to take such action, so instead the revised Bill addresses the recommendation by requiring the Secretary of State to consider any report which may have been made by a Joint Select Committee. However, it is right that such scrutiny should take place and the Government are committed to taking all steps within their power to ensure that it does.

The Government are not seeking sweeping new powers. Rather the Bill ensures that the security and intelligence agencies and law enforcement continue to have the powers they need to keep us safe against a backdrop of an increasingly complex, serious and unpredictable threat. The Bill provides the public and Parliament with greater confidence that there are robust measures in place to ensure that the powers are subject to world-leading safeguards.

The new legislation needs to be in force by 31 December 2016. During the parliamentary passage of the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014, some suggested that the sunset clause should be brought closer and therefore that new legislation should gain Royal Assent sooner. This would have resulted in substantially less time for public debate and scrutiny in Parliament.

I explained then that it was vital that sufficient time was given to examine these important powers, and Parliament agreed that approach. I subsequently set out a timetable for new legislation on the publication of David Anderson’s report, committing to publish draft legislation in the autumn and to bring forward a final Bill in the spring. By introducing the Bill now, we are ensuring that this important piece of legislation will be subject to full and thorough scrutiny by both Houses of Parliament, following the normal parliamentary timetable.

[HCWS563]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Housing

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Lord Freud) has made the following written statement.

In the autumn statement 2015, we announced that when assessing eligibility for housing benefit and universal credit that local housing allowance rates would be applied to all social rents from April 2018, where tenants had signed new or re-let tenancies from 1 April 2016.

I am able to announce today that the Government will put in place a year-long exception for all tenants of supported accommodation in the social sector so that this measure will only apply to these tenancies from April 2017, rather than April 2016. As examples, this will include refuges for those fleeing domestic abuse, homeless provision, housing for ex-offenders, as well as supported housing for older and disabled people. I can also confirm that the one year exception will extend to housing co-operatives, almshouses and community land trusts.

I am doing this because I understand the importance of ensuring that both those living in supported accommodation and those who provide this type of accommodation receive appropriate protections. This is why we are awaiting the outcome of a supported accommodation research project and subsequent policy review, to ensure support is focused on the most vulnerable, and appropriate groups are safeguarded. I consider it important to have evidence to support any decisions made, before determining the level of any protections for this cohort beyond April 2017.

I will write to social landlords and provide guidance that will allow them to advise people taking on new and re-let tenancies from either April 2016 or April 2017 (for supported accommodation) as to how they may be impacted.

[HCWS568]
State Pension Age

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Shailesh Vara): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Baroness Altmann) has made the following written statement.

I am pleased to announce, under section 27(5) of the Pensions Act 2014, the appointment of John Cridland as the independent lead of the state pension age review, which the Government will report on by May 2017.

John Cridland was most recently director-general of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). He is currently chair of the board of Transport for the North. He has previously helped to negotiate the UK’s first national minimum wage, spent 10 years on the Low Pay Commission and he was also a member of the Council of ACAS. He was awarded a CBE for services to business in 2006.

The purpose of the independent review is to make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on factors to consider in arriving at future state pension age arrangements. The recommendations should be affordable in the long term, fair to current and future generations of pensioners and consistent with supporting fuller working lives. The review will be forward looking and focused on the longer term. It will not cover the existing state pension age timetable up to April 2028 which is already legislated for.

The terms of reference for the review to this statement are available on the gov.uk website.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-03-01/HCWS562/.
Correction

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): During oral questions to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on Thursday, 4 February (Hansard, col. 1061) I said in answer to a question from my hon. Friend, the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann):

Legal proceedings were brought and the decision was made by Truro Crown court, under the hon. Judge Carr, to instead impose an enforcement order.

I should of course have referred to an enforcement undertaking rather than an order and I wish to correct the record by means of this written statement.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE
European Union

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): I have today laid before both Houses a paper, “Alternatives to membership: possible models for the United Kingdom outside the European Union”. This paper is the first part of the report that the Government will publish to meet the requirement of section 7(1) of the European Union Referendum Act 2015. The second part of this report, which will provide information about the rights and obligations that arise as a result of the UK’s membership of the EU, will be laid at a later date. Both parts of the report will be available to read together on the gov.uk website.
Written Statements

Thursday 3 March 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Business Impact Target

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): I am today publishing the Government’s target in respect of the economic impact of new regulation on business for this Parliament, along with related matters as required under section 21 of the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 (“the Act”). The current Enterprise Bill will extend the scope of the target to include statutory regulators, as well as Ministers. This statement takes account of that proposed extension.

Business impact target

The Government’s target is for a saving of £10 billion to business and voluntary or community bodies from qualifying measures that come into force or cease to be in force during this Parliament.

Interim target

The interim target covers the savings to be achieved from qualifying measures that come into force or cease to be in force in the first three years of this Parliament. The Government’s interim target is a saving of £5 billion.

Qualifying regulatory provisions

Under the Act, the measures that are in scope for the business impact target are described as “regulatory provisions”. That includes both legislation, and the activities of regulators—meaning Ministers, and in due course statutory regulators.

As with the one-in, two-out system that operated in the last Parliament, the Government must designate the categories of regulatory provision that are to be scored against the target (“qualifying regulatory provisions”). Qualifying regulatory provisions are those that do not fall within any of the exclusions set out below.

(a) Exclusions carried over from last Parliament

A number of the categories of regulatory provision that were excluded from the one-in, two-out system in the last Parliament will also be excluded from the business impact target. The exclusions are:

- Regulatory provisions that implement new or changed obligations arising from European Union regulations, decisions and directives, and other changes to international commitments and obligations, except in cases of gold-plating.
- Regulatory provisions specifically relating to civil emergencies.
- Regulatory provisions concerning fines and penalties, and redress and restitution.
- Regulatory provisions that promote competition (where these result in an increase in a direct net burden on business).
- Regulatory provisions that enable delivery of large infrastructure projects.
- Regulatory provisions that implement changes to the classification and scheduling of drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, or to national minimum wage hourly rates, where these follow the recommendations of the relevant independent advisory body.

Regulatory provisions relating to systemic financial risk.

(b) New exclusions applied in this Parliament

The remaining exclusions arise from the extension of the target to include regulator activity, and one legislative measure (the national living wage) where the offsetting measures—changes to national insurance and tax—are also excluded from the target under the Act.

In order to capture all relevant regulator actions the statutory definition of a regulatory provision is drafted in such a way that every action of a regulator in the discharge of its statutory duties potentially falls within scope. The exclusions are intended to ensure that the qualifying provisions scored under target are focused on regulator policies and practices rather than day-to-day activities. Certain activities related to economic regulation are also excluded. The exclusions are:

- Regulator casework including specific investigation and enforcement activity, individual licence decisions, and individual advice.
- Education, communications activities, and promotional campaigns by regulators, including media campaigns, posters, factsheets, bulletins, letters, websites, and information/advice helplines.
- Policy development by regulators, including formal and informal consultations, policy reviews, and ad hoc information requests.
- Changes to the organisation and management of regulators, except for those resulting from legislative changes or another policy change that is a qualifying regulatory provision.
- Regulatory provisions applying to certain business activities of operator(s) of a network or system where the operator(s) are deemed to be a monopoly or to have significant market power, specifically:
  - regulatory provisions that concern the terms upon which access is provided to those networks and systems; and
  - regulatory provisions that concern effective network and systems operation and co-ordination.
- Regulatory provisions that are price controls, except for the introduction of price controls to previously unregulated activities, or removal of pre-existing price controls.
- Changes to industry codes, except those arising from regulator action or new legislation.
- Regulatory provisions that introduce the national living wage.

Methodology for the assessment of the business impact target

The impact of each qualifying measure will be assessed on the basis of its equivalent annual net direct cost to business (EANDCB) measured in 2014 prices and with a 2015 present value base year. The contribution to the business impact target will be the sum of the EANDCB over the first five years for which the measure will be in force, or the sum of the EANDCB over the full lifetime of the measure for measures that are in force for less than five years.

The EANDCB is an estimate of the average annual net direct costs to business in each year that the measure is in force. It is calculated as the present value of the net direct cost to business divided by the sum of the discount factors appropriate for the length of time the measure is in force. The discount rate used is determined by the Green Book.
Direct impacts are those that can be identified as resulting directly from the implementation or removal/simplification of the measure.

[1] As required under section 21(1)(a) of the Act.


[4] Future annual changes to the national living wage that do not follow the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission will be in scope for the target.


Green Investment Bank

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade (Sajid Javid): In June 2015, I announced plans to move UK Green Investment Bank plc (GIB) into the private sector. The company’s success means there is strong market interest in GIB from private sector investors and 100% Government funding is no longer needed.

The company fully supports this move which will give GIB the freedom it needs to grow and increase its impact with access to much more capital than if it stayed in Government hands. And it will further demonstrate that green investment can be profitable for mainstream investors and is not just the preserve of Government.

Today, I am formally launching a sale of GIB by inviting expressions of interest from bidders. Any parties interested in acquiring GIB are now invited to come forward. Interested parties will need to respond to a bidder information form which is being published today on the gov.uk website.

I am today laying a report to Parliament on the proposed disposal of shares in GIB with information on the kind of disposal intended, the expected timescale for the disposal, and our objectives for the disposal. This report is provided in fulfilment of provisions in the Enterprise Bill and is also being provided to Ministers in the devolved Administrations.

The report includes details of our plans to create a special share in GIB as part of the sale process. This will provide protection of the company’s green purposes following a sale by granting the independent holder of the share the right to approve or reject any proposal to change the green purposes of GIB. I first announced these plans in Parliament on 2 February, when opening Second Reading of the Enterprise Bill. Details were also set out in the Government’s response to the Environmental Audit Committee’s December 2015 report on the future of GIB which was published the same day and further details are provided in letters from GIB chairman, Lord Smith of Kelvin and from Baroness Neville Rolfe, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills—copies of which will be laid in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS574]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

EU Environment Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rory Stewart): I will attend the EU Environment Council in Brussels on 4 March, along with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Climate Change, Lord Bourne, The Scottish Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Dr Aileen McLeod MSP, will also be attending Council.

Following adoption of the agenda, the list of “A” items will be approved.

Under non-legislative activities, the Council will debate the EU action plan for the circular economy and the follow-up to COP21 (climate change). There will be an exchange of views on the European semester/annual growth survey 2016 and the contribution of the environment and climate to growth and jobs. The Council will adopt a draft statement on endocrine disruptors.

Over lunch Ministers will be invited to discuss the ratification of the Paris agreement (climate change).

The following items are due to be discussed under any other business:

Energy transition—promoting environmentally friendly forms of energy in the EU.

Implementing the 7th environmental action plan.
Conclusions, and pointed to the new NATO mission as already taken in line with February European Council highlighted the importance of implementing decisions illegal migrants, and to ensure that public order and taken to manage the movement through the EU of conference, and the steps some member states had called for efforts to avert a humanitarian crisis in Greece.

The Council received an update on the recent Vienna called for efforts to avert a humanitarian crisis in Greece. The Council received an update on the recent Vienna called for efforts to avert a humanitarian crisis in Greece.

While the UK does not participate in the border elements of Schengen, I welcomed the action by the Schengen states to introduce systematic checks on EU citizens including at airports. This is something the UK already does. However, I noted two other areas where further action is needed to strengthen the external border. First, to further improve the exchange of information on the Schengen information system on entry bans and immigration data. Secondly, following the attacks in Paris, I urged the Commission to promote the phasing out of non-biometric, non-machine readable documents and to support member states to bring their identification documents into line with International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) standards. The Council agreed a general approach on the Schengen border code measure.

This was followed by an update from the presidency on the proposed draft regulation on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Given the UK’s position in relation to Schengen we will not participate in this measure, but I highlighted the importance of the UK being able to co-operate effectively with the future European Border and Coast Guard, in line with the support the UK has provided previously to Frontex, while also ensuring that the new agency did not impact on non-Schengen states’ border controls. The presidency is now aiming for a general approach on this proposal at the April JHA Council, with political agreement with the European Parliament by June.

Finally, there was a discussion on migration, as a follow-up to the European Council. The Commission called for efforts to avert a humanitarian crisis in Greece. The Council received an update on the recent Vienna conference, and the steps some member states had taken to manage the movement through the EU of illegal migrants, and to ensure that public order and security were maintained. A number of member states highlighted the importance of implementing decisions already taken in line with February European Council conclusions, and pointed to the new NATO mission as a means to reducing flows at the source. Member states also discussed the importance of ensuring registration of all migrants on arrival. I welcomed the new NATO involvement in the Aegean, and noted that policies based around redistribution would exacerbate the pull factor and would not help prevent secondary movements. I highlighted that the EU also needed to consider whether the current EU and international migration frameworks were adequate for tackling abuse.

The discussion on migration continued over lunch, which was also attended by the deputy Turkish Interior Minister and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. There was consensus on the need to support the action under way to reduce flows across the Greek-Turkish sea border and to implement the EU-Turkey action plan.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): A meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council took place on 25 February, which I attended on behalf of the UK.

The Council began with a discussion on the European Commission’s proposal for an amendment to the Schengen border code to make systematic checks on EU citizens mandatory at external borders. In response to calls from member states, the Council agreed a six-month transitional period for implementation at air borders.

While the UK does not participate in the border elements of Schengen, I welcomed the action by the Schengen states to introduce systematic checks on EU citizens including at airports. This is something the UK already does. However, I noted two other areas where further action is needed to strengthen the external border. First, to further improve the exchange of information on the Schengen information system on entry bans and immigration data. Secondly, following the attacks in Paris, I urged the Commission to promote the phasing out of non-biometric, non-machine readable documents and to support member states to bring their identification documents into line with International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) standards. The Council agreed a general approach on the Schengen border code measure.

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These properties will be used to increase the provision of shared housing and the Ministry of Defence will continue to explore whether it might be possible to transfer further surplus properties in the future.

The progress report also sets out the British-Irish visa scheme is now operating allowing recipients to travel to both Ireland and Northern Ireland on the same visa. There has now been approval for Government funding for a space propulsion test facility in Crossgar as well as a further €5.5 million for engine design in Northern Ireland. Furthermore the report sets out that Northern Ireland will significantly benefit from the Government’s regional air connectivity fund.

The economic pact sets out a new approach for the Government and the Executive to work more closely on our joint objectives. We will continue to work hard towards rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy and building a shared future.

[HCWS577]

**TRANSPORT**

**Light Dues 2016-17**

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Government are focused on delivering maritime sector growth in the United Kingdom. This includes enhancing Government leadership and creating a supportive environment that will enable the sector to thrive. The vital work of the general lighthouse authorities, which provide and maintain marine aids to navigation around these islands, forms part of this vision.

Continued real terms reductions in the three authorities’ running costs in the UK means that I am able to reduce light dues by a further penny, to 38p per net registered tonne, on 1 April 2016. This will be the third successive year in which the UK light dues rate has been cut, and means that light dues have fallen by 20% in real terms since 2010.

The Government are committed to providing long-term stability for light dues payers, so they can plan budgets effectively. To support that objective, I have set the UK general lighthouse authorities new five-year efficiency targets, succeeding those set in 2010, which require net running costs to continue falling in real terms, by on average two percentage points below the retail price index.

Ships using our busy waters depend on the effectiveness of the service provided by the general lighthouse authorities as much as their efficiency. As the authorities continue to work assets harder, harness new technology, and procure goods and services collaboratively, our common aim will be to reduce the risk to navigation and the cost of doing so effectively.

[HCWS572]

**WORK AND PENSIONS**

**Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council**


The Council will be invited to seek a general approach on the proposal for a Council decision on guidelines for employment policies in member states.

The Council will be invited to adopt draft Council conclusions in response to the Commission’s strategic engagement for gender equality, the Commission’s list of actions to advance LGBTI equality, and the 2016 annual growth survey. The Council will also be invited to adopt the draft joint employment report.

There will be policy debates on the European semester, for a contribution to the March European Council, and on the progress towards a new skills agenda for Europe.

Regarding the implementation of the country-specific recommendations, there will be a contribution from the Employment Committee (EMCO) on labour market segmentation and contractual arrangements.

The Council will be asked to endorse the key messages from EMCO on the way forward regarding the implementation of the youth guarantee.

The European Commission will make presentations on the 2016 country reports and the labour mobility package. The presidency and European Commission will make a joint presentation on social dialogue and the tripartite social summit.

Under any other business, the presidency will present information on legislative issues currently on their agenda. The Commission will present information on the European pillar of social rights, the state of play regarding the European social fund and youth employment initiative implementation, the employment and social dimension of the Energy Union, and the Istanbul convention on violence against women. Information on the 2016 work programmes of EMCO and Social Protection Committee will be presented by the committees’ respective Chairs.

[HCWS571]
Written Statements

Friday 4 March 2016

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Science and Research Budget Allocations

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): Science and research are vital to our country’s prosperity, security and wellbeing. At a time of tight control over public spending, the Government continue to protect investment and support our world-class research base.

The Government are protecting science resource funding at its current level of £4.7 billion, which will rise in cash terms every year, for the rest of the Parliament. At the same time, we are investing in new scientific infrastructure on a record scale—delivering on the £6.9 billion[1] science capital commitment in our manifesto. The total investment of £26.3 billion between 2016-17 to 2020-21 builds on the protections for the science budget in the last Parliament—meaning a decade of protection for the science budget, and a decade of sustained investment by this Government.

This includes a new £1.5 billion investment over the period 2016-17 to 2020-21 in a new global challenges research fund (GCRF), to ensure UK research takes a leading role in addressing the challenges faced by developing countries. This is a unique opportunity for UK academics to work with partners around the world and at the same time to address some of the biggest challenges of our time.

While we are building new infrastructure, we are also ensuring we get the best return on our investments. Sir Paul Nurse set out his proposals to bring together the seven research councils under the banner of Research UK, and as the Chancellor confirmed in the spending review, the Government will take forward these recommendations subject to Parliament. As such, firm allocations are being provided for 2016-17 to 2017-18; with indicative allocations only for the later years in the SR period, 2018-19 to 2019-20. Allocations will be provided for these years as changes to the research landscape are taken forward.

The allocations made today make clear the Government’s commitment to the dual support system. This system provides stability in the funding underpinning our research base through both prospective competitive grant funding for projects and programmes, alongside a block grant for universities, based on an assessment of the quality of their research. The block grant funding supports universities’ research capability and infrastructure, enabling them to invest strategically and plan ahead; to develop and support excellent researchers; to explore novel curiosity-driven research, respond to emerging priorities and lever funding from other sources. This funding is an important driver of curiosity-driven research, and budgets allocated today show that for every £1 allocated to research councils, its allocation from the research budget increases from 63p as now, to over 65p by the end of the SR period.

We will be publishing further details of these allocations today.

[1] Includes £1.1 billion spent in 2015-16.

DEFENCE

Gifting of Land Rovers: Bulgaria

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): I have today laid before Parliament a Ministry of Defence departmental minute describing a gifting of Land Rovers that the UK intends to make to the Government of Bulgaria.

This gift meets a specific Bulgarian request for assistance to help patrol its borders.

The departmental minute describes a gift of 40 Land Rovers that are vitally needed and will provide immediate benefits. The gift comprises 40 Defender Tithonus Land Rovers totalling £443,000 including transportation by the civilian contractor. The cost will be borne by the Conflict Stability and Security Fund.

Subject to completion of the departmental minute process, delivery is expected to commence in May 2016.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Correction

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): During Prime Minister’s Questions on 2 March I should have said that the latest available figures show that there are 432 fewer secondary schools operating at full or over-capacity than there were in 2010, and not 453 schools, Official Report, column 942.
The National Planning Policy Framework states that local planning authorities should have a clear understanding of housing needs in their area. It encourages local authorities to identify the accommodation needs of different groups within the community and to plan proactively to support them. While this includes recognising the needs of students it is also important that local authorities look to plan for a mix of accommodation which would support the needs of local residents, including older people.

The Government fully support providing dedicated student accommodation. This may provide low-cost housing that takes pressure off the private rented sector, avoids potential problems of student houses in multiple occupation, and increases the overall housing stock available for local people. On 25 March 2015 the Government announced the publication of its updated planning guidance on supporting the provision of dedicated student accommodation. This can be found at: http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/guidance/housing-and-economic-development-needs-assessments/methodology-assessing-housing-need

The Government fully understand that a high concentration of houses in multiple occupation in a single part of a city can change the character of that area and can lead to imbalance in communities. We do not want to see so called ‘student ghettos’ springing up in our university cities. Along with our students we want to see our university cities and towns thrive and grow. In areas experiencing problems with uncontrolled houses in multiple occupation development, local authorities are able to use their existing direction making powers to restrict the use of properties as houses in multiple occupation.

**ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE**

**Climate change**

Declarations that the UK should show leadership internationally to secure fair and ambitious agreements on tackling climate change and poverty; and further that the petitioners are inspired by their Catholic faith and Pope Francis’ Laudato Si’.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to cut carbon emissions to keep global temperature rise below the dangerous threshold of 1.5°C, and to prevent climate change pushing people deeper into poverty.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Chloe Smith, Official Report, 16 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 1651.]

**Observations from the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Amber Rudd):** The Government have demonstrated our international leadership in tackling global climate change in helping to secure the world’s first truly global agreement on climate change. The Paris agreement reached at the 21st Conference of Parties (CoP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in December 2015 marks a significant step forward towards reducing, on a global scale, the emissions that cause climate change.

**Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Brandon Lewis):** This Government have moved away from the centralised, regulatory approach which has dominated planning in recent years and created a system which encourages local authorities and local people to take responsibility for shaping their communities. Decisions on location and type of housing should reflect local priorities expressed through the Local Plan, rather than nationally imposed rules. In this case the relevant Local Plan is Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan adopted January 2015 and the Chester One City Plan 2012-2027.
The Paris agreement drives us forward on our path to limiting global temperature rises to well below 2°C and to pursue efforts to limit temperatures to 1.5°C in recognition of the impact climate change is having on the most vulnerable countries. The agreement also sets a clear long-term goal of net zero emissions by the second half of the century, showing that the world is committed to decarbonisation. Countries will now communicate their commitments to reduce emissions every 5 years and will come back to the table in 2020, after a global stocktake in 2018, to update their plans to cut emissions by 2030 or put forward new ones. For the first time, all countries will be held accountable by an independent review for acting according to their pledges.

As the petitioners note, tackling climate change goes hand in hand with improving prosperity, incomes and livelihoods for the poorest. If we fail to do so the development gains of past decades are likely to be reversed. The UK supported the adoption of the new Global Goals for Sustainable Development in 2015 and pushed for the Paris agreement to support the poorest and most vulnerable countries to curb emissions while developing, and protect themselves from the worst effects of climate change. Over the last five years through the UK’s £3.87 billion International Climate Fund (ICF) we have supported millions of the world’s poorest to better withstand weather extremes and rising temperatures. At the UN General Assembly in September 2015, the Prime Minister demonstrated UK leadership internationally by announcing a significant uplift in the UK’s climate finance of at least 50% with £5.8 billion being made available over the next five years.

Countries now need to implement this agreement. Domestically, we are considering the implications of Paris for UK policy. Our 2050 target, of an at least 80% reduction in emissions on 1990 levels is already legally binding in the UK. The “at least 80%” target is based on previous advice from the CCC that this would be consistent with the UK’s share of global 2°C action. The 1.5 °C ambition further strengthens the goal to keep the global temperature increase to below 2°C and highlights the importance of our domestic target. We remain committed to the Climate Change Act and to meeting our 2050 target. We will set out our proposals in full for how we intend to meet them in our new emissions reduction plan—due to be published towards the end of 2016.

As countries implement their commitments under the Paris agreement we expect to see more countries adopting similar targets to the UK, thereby starting to level the playing field globally and helping to drive down the costs of climate action further. One of the most important tasks for the UK is providing a compelling example to the rest of the world of how to cut carbon while controlling costs.
Petition

**Tuesday 1 March 2016**

**OBSERVATIONS**

**HEALTH**

Compensation for negligent medical treatment

*The petition of residents of the UK,*

Declares that private healthcare patients have less access to adequate redress and compensation following negligent treatment in comparison to NHS patients; further that insurance companies can withdraw cover from healthcare professionals who are alleged to have breached the terms of the insurance policy; and further that healthcare professionals under investigation for negligence should not be able to work in either the NHS or the private sector until the disciplinary proceedings have concluded to the satisfaction of the General Medical Council and patient or patients concerned and, in case of fatalities, the patients’ families.

The petitioners therefore ask the House of Commons to legislate to require insurance companies to provide affordable cover for every aspect of healthcare professionals’ work including in cases where the work was found to be negligent, and for all healthcare professionals under investigation for negligence to be suspended until the complaint has been fully resolved.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mrs Caroline Spelman, Official Report, 6 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 402.]

[PO01660]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): There are nine independent healthcare regulatory bodies with statutory responsibilities in respect of the regulation of healthcare professionals in the UK. These are the General Chiropractic Council, the General Dental Council, the Health and Care Professions Council, the General Medical Council, the General Optical Council, the General Osteopathic Council, the General Pharmaceutical Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. A healthcare professional must be registered with the relevant healthcare regulatory bodies to practise in the UK.

The purpose of regulation is to protect the public by ensuring that all who practise a health profession are doing so safely. Legislation gives the healthcare regulatory bodies four main functions:

- Setting the standards of behaviour, competence and education that health professionals must meet;
- Dealing with concerns from patients, the public and others about health professionals who are unfit to practise because of poor health, misconduct or poor performance;
- Keeping registers of health professionals who are fit to practise in the UK; and
- The healthcare regulators can also remove healthcare professionals from their registers and prevent them from practising if they consider this to be in the best interests of the public.

In order to comply with the cross border healthcare EU directive, legislation came into force in the UK in July 2014 requiring all regulated practising healthcare professionals in the UK to hold adequate insurance or indemnity cover as a condition of their registration. It is the healthcare professional’s responsibility to ensure that they have the cover required. This cover may be provided by the employer or directly through a Medical Defence Organisation or an insurance company to the individual practitioner. Where it is provided by the employer, it is the healthcare professional’s responsibility to ensure it is adequate and that additional indemnity or insurance is not needed. Regulatory bodies can remove a healthcare professional from their register if they do not have the appropriate cover.

The petition covers two distinct but separate points

(a) to legislate to require insurance companies to provide affordable cover for every aspect of healthcare professionals’ work including in cases where the work was found to be negligent,

(b) for all healthcare professionals under investigation for negligence to be suspended until the complaint has been fully resolved

Taking the two points separately

(a) Legislate to require insurance companies to provide affordable cover for every aspect of healthcare professionals’ work including in cases where the work was found to be negligent.

All employers should ensure that practitioners employed directly or under contracts for services, have both up to date registration with their relevant regulatory body to cover them for all procedures they are providing, and adequate indemnity or insurance to support their role in the organisation.

Commissioners have a role in ensuring that providers have adequate cover to sensibly manage their risk of exposure to potential claims where the work is found to be negligent.

Currently, in secondary care, staff working in NHS Trusts and NHS providers are covered by the Clinical Negligence Scheme for Trusts (CNST), which is a risk-pooling rather than an insurance system. The cost is not covered by the healthcare professional but through their employer.

In primary care, indemnity cover will be by the individual practitioner, usually through one of the Medical Defence Organisations (MDOs) or possibly a private insurance company.

For private healthcare, cover will usually be held by the individual practitioner through an insurance company, with rates set based on the risk of the individual and the role they fulfil in the organisation. This may include a cap on the value of the claim, or a restriction on practices that might be covered.

The insurance market is driven by market forces and probability of risk - so the higher risk attached to an individual practitioner the higher the premium.

There is currently joint work ongoing between Department of Health and NHS England looking at options that are available to improve affordability of insurance for primary and secondary care practitioners. There has been recognition that the increasing costs of indemnity have become problematic across the board. To this end, NHS England announced that £2.5 million
has been made available in order to support indemnity cover for out of hours GP services during the winter period. Both NHS England and the Department of Health are continuing to identify possible solutions and areas for improvement to limit the rising costs of indemnity for medical professionals.

Providing affordable cover for all practitioners where an incidence of negligent practice is found would potentially increase the risk of an individual practitioner who may not meet the professional standards required in the UK continuing to practise.

Therefore it is not deemed appropriate to legislate to require insurance companies to provide affordable cover for healthcare professionals’ work where that is found systematically to be negligent.

Already the GMC, or other relevant regulatory body, has a duty to investigate any incidents reported to them and, where necessary, take action to safeguard the health and well-being of the public.

In serious cases, fitness-to-practise proceedings can result in practitioners being removed from the register, thereby preventing them from legally practising in the UK.

(b) for all healthcare professionals under investigation for negligence to be suspended until the complaint has been fully resolved.

Serious or persistent failure to follow regulatory guidance set out by the regulatory bodies will put the registration of a healthcare professional at risk.

If an allegation is made about a medic, or other healthcare professional, who may not meet the professional standards required in the UK, their regulatory body has a duty to investigate and where necessary take action to safeguard the health and well-being of the public.

In serious cases, fitness-to-practise proceedings can result in practitioners being removed from their respective register, thus preventing them from legally practising in the UK.

Interim orders can be put in place to stop a registrant from practising, or limit what they can do, during an investigation so patients are not put at risk.

In addition the employer has a role in ensuring that they are providing a duty of care to patients by ensuring where limitations are imposed on an individual by their regulatory body, they adhere to these requirements.

All healthcare professionals working in the UK have a responsibility to ensure that they are following the guidance and best practice set out by their regulatory body and that they have the appropriate indemnity or insurance in place.

This is a requirement whether they are working in the private sector, not for profit sector or the NHS.

In order for the indemnity cover to be valid, it requires individuals to comply with any requirements and/or restrictions in place from (a) their relevant regulatory body and (b) their employer or contractor.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 22 February 2016

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia

The following is an extract from the Urgent Question on arms sales to Saudi Arabia on 28 January 2016.

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said, and as the Minister accepted, a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented magnitude has unfolded in Yemen. As we learned from the United Nations last August, Yemen in five months is like Syria after five years. It is critical that humanitarian aid gets into the country and that, for those purposes, the Red sea ports are opened up. Will the Minister say when he expects that to happen and what we and others are doing to ensure that it happens?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. and learned Friend makes a powerful point and I acknowledge his expertise and interest in the area. The logistics of getting humanitarian aid across the country are severely limited, because aid has to go through the main port of Aden in the south. It is therefore critical that the port of Hudaydah on the Red sea coast is opened up as soon as possible. That cannot happen first of all because it is in Houthi hands, and secondly because the cranes have been damaged, which is perhaps a smaller issue. It is priority for the UN envoy, Ismail Ahmed, who will be discussing improving the operation of that port as soon as possible to allow aid to get in swiftly to the rest of the country.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Stephen Phillips) during the Urgent Question on arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Ellwood: My hon. and learned Friend makes a powerful point and I acknowledge his expertise and interest in the area. The logistics of getting humanitarian aid across the country are severely limited, because aid has to go through the main port of Aden in the south. It is therefore critical that capacity issues restricting the use of the port of Hudaydah on the Red sea coast are resolved as soon as possible. That cannot happen first of all because it is in Houthi hands, and secondly because the cranes have been damaged, which is perhaps a smaller issue. It is priority for the UN envoy, Ismail Ahmed, who will be discussing improving the operation of that port as soon as possible to allow aid to get in swiftly to the rest of the country.

HEALTH

GP Access

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Health on Tuesday 9 February 2016.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): The same survey indicates that one in four people are now waiting more than a week to see their GP, and a staggering 1 million people are heading off to A&E because they cannot get an appointment with their GP. It is a total meltdown. What is the Minister doing about it?

Alistair Burt: There are 40 million more appointments available for GPs than in the past. The Government have made a commitment to transform GP access, and £175 million has been invested to test improved and innovative access to GP services. There are 57 schemes involving 2,500 practices, and by March next year more than 18 million patients—a third of the population—will have benefited from improved access and transformed service at local level. That is what we are doing about it.


Letter of correction from Alistair Burt:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Health.

The correct response should have been:

Alistair Burt: There are 40 million more appointments available for GPs than in the past. The Government have made a commitment to transform GP access, and £175 million has been invested to test improved and innovative access to GP services. There are 57 schemes involving 2,500 practices, and by March this year more than 18 million patients—a third of the population—will have benefited from improved access and transformed service at local level. That is what we are doing about it.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 23 February 2016

JUSTICE

Prisons and Probation

The following are extracts from the Opposition day debate on Prisons and Probation on 27 January 2016.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has made an important point about reoffending. I wonder whether he has had a chance to consider my suggestion that the probation and police services should be merged so that offender management outside the prison estate became the responsibility of the police, who, in the end, are having to pick up the pieces. Might we not see a step change in the numbers that he has just outlined if we made that move, as well as quite a large financial saving?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he did as Deputy Mayor of London, when he was responsible for policing and crime and made a significant contribution to reducing knife crime on our streets and in deploying the Metropolitan police more effectively. I think all of us would agree that prisons and probation cannot work effectively unless there is a close working relationship with the police service. However, I would caution against making a change at this point of the kind my hon. Friend suggests. It is a fascinating idea, and it has been put to me by others whom I respect, but we are just 12 months into the transforming rehabilitation programme initiated by my predecessor, and it is only appropriate that we acknowledge that that programme has already seen an increase in the number of frontline probation staff, again of more than 500.

Andrew Selous: We have created the National Probation Service, and I should tell Members that 19 of the 22 CRCs are being run with a staff mutual or a voluntary, charitable or social enterprise sector body alongside their owners. We monitor their performance very carefully indeed, and the October 2015 performance figures showed that we are advancing in performance in almost all areas. South Yorkshire CRC has developed an action plan to deal with the issues it faces, but I can tell the House that no CRC is in a formal remedial plan. I can also tell the House that there are 560 more probation officers than there were 12 months ago. That is the largest intake of newly qualified probation officers for some considerable period.

Letter of correction from Michael Gove:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) in the Opposition day debate on Prisons and Probation.

The correct response should have been:

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he did as Deputy Mayor of London, when he was responsible for policing and crime and made a significant contribution to reducing knife crime on our streets and in deploying the Metropolitan police more effectively. I think all of us would agree that prisons and probation cannot work effectively unless there is a close working relationship with the police service. However, I would caution against making a change at this point of the kind my hon. Friend suggests. It is a fascinating idea, and it has been put to me by others whom I respect, but we are just 12 months into the transforming rehabilitation programme initiated by my predecessor, and it is only appropriate that we acknowledge that that programme has already seen an increase in the number of frontline probation staff, again of more than 500.

Letter of correction from Andrew Selous:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the Opposition day debate on Prisons and Probation.

The correct response should have been:

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Andrew Selous): We have created the National Probation Service, and I should tell Members that 19 of the 22 CRCs are being run with a staff mutual or a voluntary, charitable or social enterprise sector body alongside their owners. We monitor their performance very carefully indeed, and the October 2015 performance figures showed that we are advancing in performance in almost all areas. South Yorkshire CRC has developed an action plan to deal with the issues it faces, but I can tell the House that no CRC is in a formal remedial plan. I can also tell the House that there are 560 more probation officers than there were 12 months ago. That is the largest intake of newly qualified probation officers for some considerable period.
Ministerial Corrections

Wednesday 2 March 2016

DEFENCE

Procurement

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on 29 February 2016.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Given that Ministry of Defence procurement operates under European law, what assessment has the Minister made of a potential exit from the European Union on UK SMEs that rely on MOD contracts?

Mr Dunne: As my hon. Friend knows, the UK defence and security industry is the largest in Europe. As the default position, we continue to place contracts on the basis of open competition. EU procurement directives apply to our procurement, which means that EU contractors are eligible to compete for our contracts in the same way as UK and other international companies, other than when we declare an article 346 exemption for warlike stores, which accounts for about 45% of our procurement.


Letter of correction from Mr Dunne:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence.

The correct response should have been:

Mr Dunne: As my hon. Friend knows, the UK defence and security industry is the largest in Europe. As the default position, we continue to place contracts on the basis of open competition. EU procurement directives apply to our procurement, which means that EU contractors are eligible to compete for our contracts in the same way as UK and other international companies, other than when we declare an article 346 exemption for warlike stores.

Mesothelioma

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on 29 February 2016.

5. Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): What plans he has to reform compensation for armed forces veterans affected by mesothelioma. [903759]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): When I announced to the House on 16 December that veterans diagnosed on or after that date with diffuse mesothelioma as a result of their service would have the option of receiving a lump sum of £140,000, I also committed to looking at whether it could be extended to veterans diagnosed before that date. We have kept our word and I am delighted to confirm that the option of a lump sum payment will be extended to veterans in receipt of a war pension for mesothelioma diagnosed before 16 December 2015.

Chris Heaton-Harris: That is thoroughly good news. Following the campaigns of many in this House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) and my friend the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), this announcement will be very, very welcome. How will people affected be able to claim the money?

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s kind comments. I have instructed the Veterans Agency to contact all those we know of with immediate effect. I hope the payments will be made on or shortly after 11 April.


Letter of correction from Mark Lancaster:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) during questions to the Secretary of State for Defence.

The correct response should have been:

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s kind comments. I have instructed Veterans UK to contact all those we know of with immediate effect. I hope the payments will be made on or shortly after 11 April.

Campaign against Daesh

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on 29 February 2016.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): What discussions has the Secretary of State or other members of the Government had with our allies inside and outside the middle east about extending military action, including airstrikes, to Libya?

Michael Fallon: There have not been discussions about extending airstrikes to Libya because at the moment there is no Libyan Government Cabinet. We have been working to assist the formation of a new Government in Libya, and it is then for that Government to make clear what assistance they require. We are party to the Libyan international assistance mission, and we will see exactly what kind of support the new Government want—whether it is assistance with advice or training, or any other kind of support.


Letter of correction from Michael Fallon:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence.

The correct response should have been:

Michael Fallon: There have not been discussions about extending airstrikes to Libya because at the moment there is no Libyan Government Cabinet. We have been working to assist the formation of a new Government in Libya, and it is then for that Government to make clear what assistance they require. We are party to the Libyan international assistance mission, and we will see exactly what kind of support the new Government want—whether it is assistance with advice or training, or any other kind of support.